A SOCIAL HISTORY OF CAMP GALANG: AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ACCOUNT OF LIFE INSIDE A SOUTHEAST ASIAN REFUGEE CAMP

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To Both My Parents, Minh and Thuc Nguyen, and Tom and Ann Boone, With Special Love
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PREFACE

After years of fighting a bitter war, first against the French, and then the Americans, the Vietnamese communists ultimately took control of the Republic of Vietnam in 1975. In the following decade, as social upheavals and political oppression prevailed, nearly a million people fled Vietnam as refugees. These refugees first sought asylum in the camps of Southeast Asia, and later many resettled abroad permanently. While some moved swiftly to their new homelands, hundreds of thousands of refugees waited hopelessly in the camps for months and even years. This latter group is the primary focus of the thesis, which will discuss at length the transit episode at Galang Refugee Camp in Indonesia.

I have selected Camp Galang for several reasons. First, as a former refugee living in this camp, I had gained some unique insights into life inside the camp. I would like to share this very personal experience so as to enhance people’s understanding of such a confusing and complicated topic. Second, since materials on refugee camps are limited, I undertake this project with the hope of increasing the sources available. While the refugee experience has been the subject of many books, movies, and television documentaries, social historians still lack substantive information about life inside the refugee camps. By focusing on Camp Galang, this study will, hopefully, provide an interesting comparison with those
studies of camps in places such as Hong Kong and Thailand. Finally, in pursuing this topic, I am attempting to raise awareness among those who are uninformed about the refugee problem and clear up some of the misconceptions they might have about Vietnamese refugees. For those who are informed, this study might enrich their understanding of the Vietnamese as persons through the evaluation of their background and experience.

This thesis is unique in that my own memoirs and recollections of the camp provide the main source of information for the writing. Some historians have maintained that sometimes even the best anthropologists and social scientists, as outsiders, cannot understand the issues as well as those who live it. On the other hand, experience alone does not make one an expert in the field. Therefore, in order to make this study as accurate and objective as possible, I have checked my observations and understanding against numerous books, newspaper and magazine articles, and government documents, all of which supply specific facts and broad interpretations of the refugee movements. Any inaccurate interpretations of evidence and personal observations remain, of course, my own responsibility.

The following chapters will first discuss briefly the history of Vietnam and the causes of the refugee movements, and then concentrate on Camp Galang. In this thesis the life stories of the refugees receive great emphasis, with particular attention focusing on the perennial problem of escape, the quality of life inside the camp, and refugees' hopes and fears for the future.
CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION: THE HISTORICAL CAUSES OF THE REFUGEE MOVEMENTS

The problem of massive displacement of peoples is an extraordinary phenomenon that is largely unique to the twentieth century. In recent decades, as wars, political chaos, and other cataclysmic events swept across countries of the Third World, huge waves of refugees have fled their homelands in search of freedom and a new life.

For over a decade since Saigon fell to the communists in 1975, more than 800,000 people have fled Vietnam to seek refuge in other countries. Although the violation of human rights has been the primary impetus for this large migration, it is often difficult to explain more precisely why people leave their country. On one extreme, since the decision to leave varies according to each individual's circumstances, there are multiple subtle reasons for an exodus. On the other extreme, one can generalize, as many refugees do, that "people left because of the communists." While no single explanation proves an adequate reason for the phenomenon, catastrophic changes outside and inside of Vietnam after 1975--foreign relations, international politics, government policies, as well as social, economic, and political upheavals--have been responsible for the refugees' departure.
Interestingly, the makeup of groups who left Vietnam has changed over time: these groups included not only those who were involved with the old regime, but also Northerners resident in the south, Catholics, ethnic Chinese from both North and South Vietnam, and other groups such as unaccompanied minors. To understand this complex phenomenon, the history of Vietnam, in which trends of social dislocations have often emerged, merits a brief discussion.

Historically, Vietnam has experienced large-scale migrations. The Vietnamese were themselves a migrant people, originating from the area which is today southern China. Vietnam, surrounded by China, Laos, and Cambodia, has had a legacy of ethnic and cultural animosities, coupled with territorial tensions with neighboring countries.³

To the north, the giant neighbor China has been a great threat to Vietnam. In 111 B.C., Vietnam was conquered by forces of China’s Han dynasty and remained under Chinese rule for more than a thousand years. Not until 939 A.D. did the Vietnamese oust their conquerors and begin a southward expansion that, by the mid-18th century, reached the Gulf of Siam.⁴

Despite remarkable military achievements such as this one, the Vietnamese often suffered from internal political divisions. During the 17th and 18th centuries, there were numerous power struggles and attempts to reunify Vietnam, which was at this time divided near the 17th parallel. Following a devastating civil war in the 18th century, a southern general, Nguyen Anh, with French assistance, prevailed and ultimately reunited Vietnam. Taking the name Gia Long, Nguyen Anh then proclaimed himself the emperor of
Vietnam. Under Anh’s rule, French influence in Vietnam extended and deepened. Taking advantage of Vietnam’s weak military defense and vulnerability to colonialism, the French proceeded to conquer Vietnam by first attacking the city of Danang in 1858, and then, in 1884, incorporating Vietnam into the Indochinese union, which included Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia.\(^5\)

Fiercely nationalistic, the Vietnamese never truly tolerated French rule. France’s exploitative and racist policies provoked stiff resistance from all segments of the Vietnamese society. By 1930, the Vietnamese Nationalist Party had revolted against the French, but the uprising was quickly suppressed, and Vietnam witnessed an ensuing period of strong repression from the French. But the anti-French movement did not completely disappear, as the communists in the north, who proved to be adept at underground organization and survival, resumed the leadership of this movement. Eventually, after a brief period of Japanese occupation during World War II, the Viet Minh leaders (a coalition of communists and nationalists) announced the formation of a Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) and on 2 September 1945, proclaimed Vietnam’s independence.\(^6\)

When the DRV was established, deep divisions between Vietnamese communists and non-communist nationalists began to surface, especially in the South. Now the political picture became more intricately woven, since there was a three-way struggle among the Vietnamese communists (led by Ho Chi Minh), the French, and the Vietnamese nationalists (nominally led by Bao Dai). While the communists sought to portray their struggle as a national uprising, the French desperately attempted to reestablish their control, and
the non-communist nationalists, many of whom chose to fight alongside the French against the communists, wanted neither French nor communist domination.\(^7\)

The communist forces fought a successful guerrilla campaign and eventually controlled much of rural Vietnam. Ultimately, with great discipline and leadership from Ho Chi Minh, the Viet Minh defeated the French at the battle of Dien Bien Phu in May 1954, and the subsequent conference at Geneva, where France signed the Agreement on the Cessation of Hostilities in Vietnam on 20 July 1954, marked the end of the eight-year war and French colonial rule in Indochina.\(^8\)

At the Geneva Conference in 1954, a cease-fire agreement was negotiated. This agreement divided the country at the 17th parallel and provided for, among other stipulations, a 300-day period for free movement of population between North and South Vietnam. Since this stipulation allowed people to migrate, more than 850,000 Vietnamese, the majority of whom were Catholics, moved from north to south.\(^9\)

Following the partition of Vietnam, both Northerners and Southerners felt that the terms of the negotiated agreement were ambiguous. Although the Geneva Conference in 1954 did establish a cease-fire, neither side was willing to accept the permanent division of the country at the 17th parallel. Moreover, the understanding that general elections would be called by July 1956 never materialized, and the United States at this point clearly opposed any solution that might lead to the communists controlling South
Vietnam. The U. S. thus began to get involved in Vietnamese affairs. But before America's heavy involvement, France's 70-year rule had left a legacy of social, religious, and political divisions in Vietnam. New French economic developments divided the Vietnamese into various social segments: a middle class of landlords, entrepreneurs, government officials, urban wage-earners, and small businessmen.

Additionally, the Western educational system and Catholicism introduced by the French drastically altered the Vietnamese society, which rested on Confucianism in its political and cultural forms, and on the communal, social, and economic structure of the village. As regional differences emerged among the Vietnamese people, the colonial period transformed Vietnam administratively, economically, socially, and politically. French intervention had a complex impact on the existing social structure, often reinforcing existing differences among the Vietnamese living in the North, Central, and South. French favoritism of the Catholic and Chinese minorities further exacerbated ethnic and religious strains.

After the French left Vietnam in 1956, there was a temporary power vacuum in the South, but it was quickly filled with the installment of American-supported Ngo Dinh Diem, who was appointed by Bao Dai as prime minister of the country. Diem, through substantial economic and military aid from the U. S., was able to improve the economy and build a national army and civilian administration. But Diem's government was unpopular because of rampant corruption and political repression, and it collapsed with the
assassination of Diem in 1963. Later, continual guerrilla warfare of the National Liberation Front (a communist organization in South Vietnam) prompted the United States to get heavily involved in Vietnam. In the Cold War, the United States considered every advance by the communists a loss for Americans. Realizing this threat, President Lyndon B. Johnson, in July 1965, committed up to 125,000 U. S. combat troops in Vietnam, and, by the spring of 1969, there were over 543,000 U. S. troops stationed there.\textsuperscript{13}

During American’s intervention, Vietnam suffered further social disruptions. The United States’s war policies contributed to the mass movements of people. America’s “search and destroy” missions, which aimed at demoralizing the enemy with military superiority, forced many Vietnamese to leave their ancestral land in the countryside. Consequently, by 1967 more than three million Vietnamese in the South were compelled to leave their homes.\textsuperscript{14} And toward the end of the war, in 1973, the number had grown to nearly ten million, which was more than half the entire population of South Vietnam.\textsuperscript{15} Finding that the countryside was obliterated with heavy bombings, many refugees were forced to flee to the cities, a transition that left them with permanent psychological scars. These war policies were destructive to the Vietnamese culture, which greatly emphasizes the ties to ancestral land.\textsuperscript{16}

Such devastations weakened the morale of the South Vietnamese, preventing them from effectively resisting the communist attacks. Even with America's superior military support, South Vietnam inevitably fell to the communists because of its inability to build solidarity.
American involvement in Vietnam did not rectify the deep social divisions, but further broke down the society into many subgroups, who had to reshape their old values and adapt to new ones. In the midst of conflicting social, religious, and political values, the Vietnamese became disillusioned and distrustful of each other, especially in the South, where foreign influences were prevalent. While Chinese Confucianism pervaded Vietnamese society in the early centuries after Vietnam's birth, French and American cultures produced a Western way of life that was in many ways alien to the Vietnamese culture.17

Unable to cooperate because of deep social divisions, South Vietnam depended heavily on American's assistance in the fight against communism. The South Vietnamese people had anticipated that Americans would support them until the end, but this was an incorrect assumption. Due to popular pressure at home, Americans gradually withdrew from Vietnam. By the end of 1973, most U.S. troops were ordered home according to the 1973 Peace Agreement, and two years later, on 30 April 1975, Saigon predictably fell to the communists. This event signified one of the roughest and ugliest transitions in Vietnam's recent history.18

When the communists took over, hundreds of thousands of people decided to leave Vietnam. There was a first major wave of refugees, preceding and immediately following the establishment of communist control of Saigon in April 1975. In the last days of Saigon a widespread belief that a communist victory would entail a bloodbath of all those who had been linked in any way with governments in the South, a belief long reinforced by American-
inspired propaganda, acutely raised the level of terror. In this hopeless situation, sharpened by fears of communist reprisals, escaping Vietnam appeared to many people as the only chance of personal survival. In the midst of panic, confusion, and mass hysteria, 135,000 Vietnamese escaped from the end of April to mid-May 1975.19

This first wave of refugees was made up mainly of "anticipatory refugees." They left because of family links, often through children studying abroad or because of political and religious ties with Americans and Vietnam's former government. These Vietnamese generally had high status in government or business. Often rich and Western-educated, they represented a cross-section of ethnic origins: Northerners, elite Southerners, and ethnic Chinese. By taking valuables with them, these early refugees were able to settle comfortably in the country of their choice, and in flight, many of these families remained intact, a characteristic unique to this group.20

The second wave of refugees left from mid-1975 to early 1978. This group consisted of people who had connection with the former governments but initially did not feel the need to escape. Later, however, when conditions in Vietnam worsened--increasing persecution, confusion, and depression--many of these people gradually left. In other words, this exodus of refugees fled Vietnam principally because of the drastic changes within Vietnam in the years following 1975.21

The communists unified Vietnam in 1975 after decades of division and foreign domination, but their governance was too
extreme for many South Vietnamese who valued democracy and personal freedom. The communists, who were initially considered popular for their victory over the French, radically altered the normal patterns of life in Vietnam after their victory over the Americans. They imposed new, stringent laws governing every aspect of life, including religion and education, so as to set Vietnam on the road to socialism; social and cultural rules were established according to Marxist-Leninist principles. Made up mostly of the uneducated segment of society, the communists blindly set out to achieve the utopian goals that Marx had delineated a century earlier. In so doing, they intentionally abolished what was distinctively Vietnamese.

In this new Vietnamese society, people's civil rights were slowly taken away, many unreachable economic goals were set, unrealistic sacrifices were expected of the Vietnamese, and people's freedoms of thinking were curtailed. More destructive to the Vietnamese society was the replacement of ancestor worship and other religious customs with the communist ideology. The Vietnamese centuries-old society was conveniently reduced to two groups: those who embraced the communist doctrine and those who did not. In such an environment, sons betrayed fathers; families turned each other in for not conforming to the communist ideology. While few tolerated French exploitation, communism also turned out to be an extreme experiment.22

The program that the communists undertook was reminiscent of the Cultural Revolution which had taken place in China a decade earlier, a campaign that persecuted those who were considered
"counterrevolutionary." Likewise, after 1975 persecutions penetrated throughout Vietnam and were aimed at a broad range of citizens: those who had had connection with the old regime; those who had worked for the United States during the war; those who were Catholics; and those who appeared unwilling to worship communism. This program further created a general sense of oppression for those not specifically targeted for purges. But not all groups were equally affected by changes. While most Vietnamese experienced some kind of repression, one group that was most noticeably affected by the communist's policies were the Hoa, the ethnic Chinese living in Vietnam.23

After 1975, Vietnam's relations with China rapidly deteriorated.24 In the face of escalating ill-will, the Hoa quickly became the focus of attention. The Hoa, who made up two percent of Vietnam's population, controlled approximately eighty percent of the light industry and almost all marketing of rice in the South. Because of their economic might, Vietnam feared that China would use the Hoa as a pressure group that would eventually threaten Vietnam's national sovereignty. This suspicion, combined with the jealousy toward these Chinese for their traditional high standard of living, compelled the Vietnamese government to impose strict rules and regulations upon the Hoa, who were, in 1976, ordered to register their citizenship and shut down their Chinese newspapers and schools. The situation worsened when a conflict at the Sino-Vietnamese border erupted in April of 1977, after which Vietnam tightened the grips on the Hoa in the North and forced them to take
Vietnamese citizenship. This anti-Chinese campaign was known as "Pei Hoa."²⁵

The lives of the Hoa were further threatened when private businesses were nationalized in 1978 and a new currency was introduced with limits on the amounts of money that could be held. Many Chinese, due to discriminatory legislation, were thrown out of work and were compelled to leave for the New Economic Zones.²⁶

Facing such blatant discrimination, more than 250,000 Vietnamese, made up mainly of ethnic Chinese, chose to become refugees instead: they crossed into China before the border was closed in July 1978. The Hoa thus made up the majority of the third wave of refugees who left Vietnam from mid-1978 to mid-1979.²⁷

The last wave of refugees began fleeing Vietnam in 1979 and has continued to the present. These recent refugees have often been labeled as "economic migrants."²⁸ But, again, since the refugees' motives to leave are inextricably mixed, it is difficult to determine who are and are not "economic" refugees.

Whatever the cause for the exodus, the decay of the domestic economy certainly influenced the Vietnamese flight. By 1975, Vietnam was devastated by centuries of wars and social and political instability. After the fall of Saigon, the temporary communist government in the South, the Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG), faced a major task of rebuilding the country. But this economic goal appeared unreachable because of numerous obstacles.²⁹

The first obstacle was the loss of revenue in the country's economy. In 1974, 36 percent of the budget of South Vietnam was
funded by international aid. This source of revenue disappeared when the war ended. In addition, widespread unemployment occurred, at a one-in-seven rate, partially created by the withdrawal of the Americans who, in 1969, had employed 360,000 civilians. Industry and commerce were at a standstill, as were all lines of communication. Skilled personnel was scarce, and a thriving black market emerged as economic policies tightened. The transportation system was inadequate, as there were chronic shortages of vehicles and spare parts.30

Moreover, there were major food shortages. The government attempted to solve this problem by forcing people to return to farm often extensive, unused areas of the land, which were designated as New Economic Zones. In 1976, the Vietnamese government established the Second Five-Year Plan, which set goals to rebuild industry and agriculture. But inevitably, the program failed due to the lack of financial aid from the international community. Because of Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia in 1978, the United States and other countries condemned such action and persuaded the world financial agencies to reject Vietnam's loan requests. China, which resented Vietnam's recent friendship with the Soviet Union and influence in Southeast Asia, followed a similar path by withdrawing all business activities in Vietnam.31

In the face of this economic embargo, the Soviet Union's assistance remained the main source for development, but this financial source was much lower than anticipated. These events created a gloomy picture and generated an atmosphere of repression, which, to a large extent, convinced some Vietnamese refugees that
they had nothing to lose by leaving Vietnam. For some who decided to escape Vietnam, communism became synonymous with oppression, depression, and failure. Their departure became a symbol of dissidence and dissatisfaction.32

Some also left because of unrealistic expectations about their standards of living. The period of America's presence created an artificially sustained economy and a glamorous lifestyle. When the communists took over Saigon, that lifestyle quickly disappeared, and people had a sense of despondency, nostalgia, and a feeling of being betrayed by Americans. When combined, all of the above factors produced the unprecedented waves of refugees fleeing to other Asian countries.

Clearly, throughout their history, as wars and social disruptions ravaged the country, the Vietnamese have been caught up in situations that they were helpless to control. Many Vietnamese persevered and hoped for little more than the peace that would enable them to return to ordinary life. The war ultimately ended in 1975, and Vietnam was unified and its independence achieved, but through communism, which immediately rejected much of what many people believed was uniquely Vietnamese. The emphasis on Vietnamese customs and traditions, education, religion, and loyalty to the family quickly vanished, as the state became the sole focus of daily life. In opposition to these drastic changes there began a steady exodus of Vietnamese from their homeland that was to last for nearly two decades.
Figure 1. Map of Vietnam (reprinted from Linda Hitchcox, *Vietnamese Refugees in Southeast Asian Camps* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990), viii).
Figure 3. Points of Departure (reprinted from Linda Hitchcox, *Vietnamese Refugees in Southeast Asian Camps* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990), 20).
ENDNOTES


4 Ibid., 26-50.

5 Ibid., 58-76.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Viviani, 22. Later, many of these migrants and their families made up the majority of the refugees escaping Vietnam. Since these people could either remain in the North under the communist rule, or move South where democracy could still become a reality, many chose the latter alternative. These people felt that they could not freely practice their religion under communism, and thus, when opportunity allowed, they moved South. Although French colonialism was unacceptable, these people felt that the South provided a potential ground for democracy to develop, whereas such a possibility did not exist in the North under the communist regime. On the other hand, a much less significant movement, mainly made up of the Viet Minh and their families, moved from south to north.

10 Hitchcox, 37.

11 Ibid.

12 Cima, 26-79.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid., 32.
15Ibid., 33. Under the “strategic hamlet” program, President Diem relocated thousands of Vietnamese, and this policy was later adopted by the Americans as well.

16Ibid. Ancestor worship is an important aspect of the Vietnamese culture. Once detached from the ancestral land, the Vietnamese refugees who fled to the cities could not visit their ancestral graves and could not carry on the traditional duties to the dead; this detachment produced a great sense of loss and grief. Later, this sense of dislocation became inherent when many of these Vietnamese saw fleeing to other countries as an extension of the Vietnam War and the solution to life’s problems.

17Hitchcox, 15-60.

18Ibid., 61-94.

19Viviani, 40.

20Ibid. While the decisions to leave had been influenced by the pervasive American presence in Vietnam in the decade before 1975, President Gerald Ford’s assurance of entry for 176,000 evacuees made in mid-April provided the opportunity, and the Seventh Fleet the means, of departure. Overall, many people who left cannot be categorized easily, for their motives of fear and hope for the future in a new rich country were inextricably mixed.

21Many who supported the communists were often uneducated people who did not realize how extreme communism was. Afterwards, these people regretted their previous support for the communists as they gradually came to grips with communist policies. Thus, some left because they felt betrayed by the Vietnamese communists. Most of the professional and middle class, on the other hand, have been virulently anti-communist all along, and these people tended to leave steadily in large numbers.


23Ibid., 51-80.
Vietnam's close relationship with the Soviet Union after the war, coupled with the Sino-American rapprochement, produced ill-will between China and Vietnam. China feared that the Soviets might use Vietnam as a puppet state to gain influence in Southeast Asia.

Hitchcox, 90.

New Economic Zones were the undeveloped lands in Vietnam prior to the communist takeover. These lands were infertile and were disease-infested areas.

Ibid., 91-97.

Under the U.N. definition some of the refugees are economic migrants. However, deciding who are political refugees and who are economic migrants is extremely difficult, given the historical context of Vietnam. On the surface, many people did leave because they could not earn a sufficient living in the New Economic Zones, but these economic difficulties are often strongly tied to political issues.

Viviani, 48.

Hitchcox, 50-80.

Ibid.

Viviani, 34-40.
Refugees who fled Vietnam sought sanctuary in nearby Asian countries, especially Malaysia, Thailand, Hong Kong, the Philippines, and Indonesia. After having received the refugees, the host governments immediately requested financial assistance from the international community and separated the refugees from the indigenous population. On 21-22 July 1979, the United Nations met in Geneva and agreed to provide for the establishment of several refugee camps in Southeast Asia. Originally, the camps were intended to control temporarily the movement of refugees within the first asylum countries and then send these refugees to the third countries. However, because of economic considerations, the camps gradually became holding centers in which refugees' political status was to be assessed by the third countries for acceptance to resettle.\(^1\)

The rationale for establishing all of the camps was the same, but because of variations in policies of the host countries, these camps were very different in terms of setting and the level of humaneness. Camp Galang in Indonesia exemplifies this difference.\(^2\)

Indonesia was an important first asylum for refugees at the start of the exodus, but it did not receive as many refugees as Malaysia or Thailand. Later, as the other Southeast Asian countries took hard-line measures regarding acceptance for asylum, including
the infamous push-off policy by Malaysia, the number of refugees who reached Indonesia increased substantially. In 1977, only 927 refugees arrived in Indonesia.\(^3\) That figure quadrupled to 3,855 by 1978.\(^4\) And in 1979, when Malaysia reportedly turned 51,632 refugees away from its shores, the number of refugees who reached Indonesia swelled to 48,651.\(^5\) Out of these refugees, approximately 46,000 arrived in the Anambas Archipelago.\(^6\)

The Anambas Archipelago is located southeast of Malaysia and is considered an inhospitable area. The early refugees who arrived in Indonesia lived in several small camps throughout this archipelago. The most populated refugee camp was located on the remote Terempa Islands, the largest group of islands in the Anambas. Since these islands are isolated, people who would like to visit or reach them have to hire local non-motorized sampans. The jungle-like areas where the refugee camps were located posed a logistic problem even for the local population.\(^7\)

The Terempa Refugee Camp was initially constructed mainly of flimsy pole and thatched shacks, which the refugees had built for temporary shelter. This camp lacked potable water and arable land. Almost 6,000 refugees had to use a very small stream dripping from the hillside for fresh water. The shacks were constructed almost on top of one another on the hilly terrain, vulnerable to the destructive monsoons. Malaria was a serious problem in this area, and there was a lack of medicines for the refugees, including insufficient vitamins to combat a growing problem of child anemia within the camp. Skin diseases and sores were common among the children, reflecting the
effect of the extremely unsanitary conditions under which the refugees were living.⁸

There were two other main refugee camps in the Anambas Islands: Letung and Kuku each held about 5,000 refugees. Like other camps in the Anambas, Letung and Kuku were inadequate for hosting the refugees. In response to the hazardous living conditions in these camps, the UNHCR funded the establishment of a refugee camp on Galang Island.⁹

Camp Galang was built in the summer of 1979 and became operative in early 1980. Located on a 40-square-mile island off the coast of Sumatra, Galang was about 35 miles directly south of Singapore. Galang was an “open” camp, which means it had greater flexibility than the prison-like camps in Thailand and Hong Kong (such as Hei Ling Chau, Chi Ma Wan, and Khao I Dang). Unlike the “closed camps,” which were often surrounded by barbed-wire fences, Camp Galang allowed the refugees to move freely within the island. However, the fact that the camp was located on an island constricted the movement of the refugees, who were not allowed to leave the island unless they had to go to Singapore for special medical treatment and for other emergencies. Located in a tropical, hilly area, the camp was about 8 miles from the main port. The approach to the camp was a concrete road controlled by a checkpoint where people wishing to enter the camp were scrutinized. There were a few dirt roads and small alleys for passage within the camp.¹⁰

Camp Galang had two housing sites, each of which was designed to hold about 10,000 refugees. Site I served as a Refugee Processing Center (RPC), the first to be offered in Southeast Asia.
This processing center was created to house refugees temporarily and thus lessen the burden of other Southeast Asian countries. Additionally, the Processing Center had the purpose of reminding the host countries of their special commitment to the refugees. Site I was divided into 8 zones, and each had a leader who frequently attended meetings and subsequently informed the fellow refugees about the new rules and regulations of the camp.\textsuperscript{11}

There were about 250 barracks in Site I, and each barrack held about 40 people. The barracks were built in rows of 20, with their doors facing the dirt roads. Each barrack was about 180 feet long, 22 feet wide, having four bathrooms, two for men and two for women. The barracks were made of plywood walls, tin roofs, and concrete floors. Each barrack had two long tiers, separated by an alley six feet wide, and these tiers served as the sleeping areas. There were four platforms—two on each side of, and attached to, the barrack—serving as the cooking, dining, and laundry area, on which people raised canopies to block the piercing, tropical sun rays and the occasional rain. These barracks were located in hilly, dusty areas, and the wind frequently produced tides of dirt everywhere.\textsuperscript{12}

The refugees were allocated living spaces measuring about nine feet by four feet that were arranged along the two tiers within each barrack. These spaces were usually crammed with the possessions that most Vietnamese had managed to acquire during the time they lived there. Such possessions were bequeathed by those leaving the camp to those who stayed behind. Outside the barracks, jumbles of electrical wires were connected from barrack to barrack, and the speakers were everywhere, ready to broadcast the
daily news and announcements. Some areas inside the barrack were vividly decorated with paintings, posters, and sculptures, and family altars were on high shelves, in front of which candles were kept constantly burning at night.13

Refugees who were accepted to resettle in the United States lived in Site II, which was nine miles from Site I. The camp structure of Site II was different from Site I. Site II was located further in the interior of Galang Island in a hilly and thick-forested area. Although it had about the same number of barracks (250) as Site I, the design for these barracks was unique: the barracks were apartment style, each having two floors. Four people shared a room, which was equipped with cooking utensils, and every two rooms had a bathroom adjacent to the barrack. Site II was also divided into 8 zones, with their respective zone leaders. Symbolically, Site II represented hope and security, for the refugees who moved to this camp knew for certain that they would soon resettle in the United States.14

Camp Galang possessed a well-equipped, modern hospital, as well as an adult library, a children's library, and an educational center, where people could enroll in English and vocational (for example, typing and engineering) courses. There was a Catholic church and a Buddhist pagoda, both of which were located on the highest hills overlooking the Galang valley. The Indonesian government built an Unaccompanied Minor Center for the children from age 8 to 14 who came to the camp alone.15

Camp Galang hosted both Vietnamese and Cambodian refugees. The camp for Cambodians held about 2000 people.
about 3 miles south of, and was similar in style to, Site I. For administrative purposes, the Cambodians were segregated from the Vietnamese community, and communication between the two groups was lacking. However, there were activities (for example, sports and bible groups) that bridged the gap of cultural differences and promoted good will.16

The funding for Camp Galang came primarily from the United Nations High Committee on Refugees (UNHCR). Since most camps were established at about the same time in response to the 1979 Geneva Conference, they had a similar administrative structure. Most camps were operated jointly by the UNHCR, the local governments, and voluntary agencies. There were certain common factors among these camps, including at least minimal shelter, food, water, some medical care, and limited educational and vocational activity. But there were variations, particularly in the ways of implementation, depending on the host country’s economic and political circumstances. In general, the host country government provided the staff and administration of the camp, but it did not create any real opportunity for constructive activity inside the camp, so that boredom was endemic. There were three UNHCR representatives to cope with the number of refugees in Galang, and this number was considered inadequate by the United States.17

The UNHCR representatives monitored the use of U.N. funds, in addition to observing the circumstances and conditions of the refugees. Based in Geneva, UNHCR worked closely with the Indonesian administration in Camp Galang regarding financial and operational purposes. UNHCR officials also had access to rice in order
to take samples for analysis and checked on quality. But UNHCR played a somewhat passive role, as the U.N. organization avoided any obvious actions which might be construed as initiating policy for Indonesia. In short, as an agency of the United Nations functioning in and with the cooperation of "sovereign" states, it has been reluctant to initiate policies. According to one official, UNHCR is "an operational agency which is accountable to the international community for the protection of refugees and the effective implementation of solution-oriented assistance programs." UNHCR has tended to become involved in the monitoring of screening processes to assess eligibility for refugee status, such as in the case of the screening of Laotians on the Thai-Laotian border and the Vietnamese in Hong Kong.

Up until 1989 when repatriation first became a possible alternative, UNHCR was primarily concerned with resettlement, and this process has remained an important part of the work on behalf of those people who have been given refugee status. Collecting case histories from refugees and making applications on their behalf to the governments of resettlement countries have also been UNHCR's important tasks.

UNHCR has also played a small part in deciding which agencies will participate in relief programs, even though it may fund those agencies through the offices of the host government. The refugees at Camp Galang perceived the main function of UNHCR as being resettlement, but they did not often understand that this role was only one of implementation. In other words, there was often a misconception within the camp that UNHCR could by itself produce
resettlement places and do more than promote the cause of particularly disadvantaged groups. Despite these limitations, UNHCR's role in recent years has expanded to deal with the massive problems of care, maintenance, and resettlement.21

The Intergovernmental Committee for Migration (ICM) is another agency that has been vital in the administrative functions in Camp Galang. Originally formed in 1952 to assist the movement of people in post-war Europe, ICM has developed into an international specialized agency. It has provided two services in the refugee camps of Southeast Asia. One is the medical screening for refugees coming into the United States and the other is arranging air travel for refugees from Indonesia and other Southeast Asian countries to the United States and elsewhere. In cooperation with UNHCR, ICM provides a mental health program for the refugees. ICM functions have been an important aspect of the U.S. refugee program. Its financial arrangements call for reimbursement of expenses incurred in the processing of each refugee. Overall, ICM medical procedure has been both inexpensive and highly necessary.22

The American's Joint Voluntary Agency (JVA) has likewise played a crucial role in Camp Galang. Set up under the auspices of the American Council of Voluntary Agencies, the JVA has represented the fourteen resettlement agencies that have been responsible for receiving and settling the refugees in the United States. Contracting with the U. S. Department of State, JVA has screened and processed refugees for entry into the United States under the U. S. Indochinese Refugee Resettlement Program. In Indonesia JVA has been staffed and administered by the
International Rescue Committee and coordinated with the U. S. Embassy's Counsellor for Refugee and Migration Affairs. Its main tasks have been to identify and interview refugee applicants, prepare and present cases to the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), and obtain sponsors through private resettlement agencies. INS has been responsible for making the final decision about an individual's eligibility for refugee status. Since the policies of JVA have been guided by the Department of State, disagreements have often arisen between JVA and INS over judgments of individual cases and interviewing procedures.23

Neither UNHCR nor the Indonesian government could function in Camp Galang as well as it did without assistance from various voluntary agencies, such as Save the Children and the Red Cross. Some of these agencies were mission-oriented, others philanthropic. The role of these groups has been to provide assistance in the day-to-day care and management of refugees. Some of these voluntary organizations, particularly Save the Children, have offered English and vocational courses to the refugees. During 1987 there were as many as 22 voluntary agencies working within Camp Galang. These agencies were usually chosen and allocated funds by the government department of the country concerned, with the cooperation of UNHCR. Most agencies wished to maintain a strong presence in relief and assistance work, but this desire has frequently led to competition among groups providing similar services. Occasionally, agency workers, out of sympathy for desperate refugees, have made direct contacts with embassies and sponsors to arrange for resettlement place, even though this arrangement has been the role of UNHCR.
This action has often blurred the role of UNHCR and confused many refugees, since sometimes it was possible for agency staff to arrange sponsorships for refugees, particularly if the agencies were Christian organizations.24

Overall, Indonesia has given asylum to approximately 120,000 refugees, and Site I on Galang served as a processing center until 1986. Indonesia was enthusiastic at first and felt sympathetic toward the refugees. However, it gradually became reluctant to accept refugees for a number of reasons. First, Indonesia is a developing nation with a growing population of 150,000,000, the fifth largest in the world. As such, it has its own problems resulting from unemployment, and poverty appears to plague this country. These kinds of domestic problems have impaired Indonesia’s ability to care for refugees.25

Second, most incoming refugees to Indonesia were ethnic Chinese, whom the local population disliked. Chinese racial and religious differences produced tensions and ill feeling, and there have been animosities toward the Chinese minority living in Indonesia. The Indonesians feared that the ethnic Chinese refugees might join Indonesia’s economically powerful Chinese elite, which contained only 3 percent of Indonesia’s population but controlled approximately 80 percent of the economy. The Indonesian government was concerned that refugees might have a strong impact on Indonesia’s political, economic, and social conditions. In addition, the Indonesian military opposed accepting refugees who it viewed as a potential security threat. For religious reasons, Muslims also rejected Chinese refugees. But since most of the refugees who
arrived in Indonesia landed on remote, underpopulated islands within the Anambas and Natunas archipelagoes, most Indonesians did not perceive them as posing any particular threat. Moreover, to alleviate Indonesians' fears concerning the refugees' presence, Indonesia has not allowed refugees to resettle on its territory. \(^{26}\)

Taken as a whole, however, Indonesia has been cooperative and generous in the refugee situation. The population of refugees in the camp seemed manageable, as the rate of departures for third countries outweighed that of arrivals. For example, in 1988 the UNHCR reported 1,000 departures for resettlement against only 125 arrivals. \(^{27}\) Moreover, the annual funding of $1.5 million from the UNHCR for administrative costs limited Indonesia's burden, encouraging Indonesia to maintain its good will. \(^{28}\)

In recent years, an influx of over 1,000 Cambodians who are mostly economic migrants with little chance of resettlement has led to concern that poor rates of resettlement in a third country will saddle Indonesia with its own refugee problem. Publicly, Indonesia has stood firmly by its policy of granting first asylum. But this position has been eroded by a combination of factors. First, the new, strict screening procedures established at the Geneva Conference on refugees in June 1989 have begun to alert Indonesia to the possibility of some refugees not being resettled. Second, Indonesian officials have been critical of Malaysia's policy of pushing off the refugees, providing asylum only long enough to enable refugees to refuel. UNHCR claimed that at least 4,000 boat people have arrived in Indonesia after being pushed off from Malaysia--accounting for most of the rise in the numbers of arriving at Galang. \(^{29}\)
Finally, the increasing number of Cambodian—as opposed to Vietnamese—boat people landing in Indonesia has presented a new problem. The Cambodians, some of whom carry passports and could not be classified as refugees under the screening process, will never be resettled. These people have been perceived by the third countries as “well-prepared economic migrants,” rather than genuine refugees.30

Despite these on-going difficulties, Indonesia remains a solid host country for refugees from Vietnam. Galang has long been regarded by the refugees as friendly and open, promising better chances of resettlement in a third country than Thailand’s or Malaysia’s crowded camps. By 1990, there were only about 12,000 refugees in Camp Galang.31 For many refugees, Galang has come to symbolize hopes and dreams, but also concern about their future. Through these common feelings, the Vietnamese refugees of different background attempted to build a community at Galang, where they all shared a transitory experience of living in the camp.
Figure 5. The Design of Barrack (drawing by Son Nguyen).

A. Sleeping Areas
B. Cooking and Dining Platforms
C. Doors
D. Men Bathrooms
E. Women Bathrooms
F. Alley
ENDNOTES

1 Linda Hitchcox, *Vietnamese Refugees in Southeast Asian Camps* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 96-120.

2 Ibid.


4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.


7 Ibid.

8 Ibid. In order to increase their standard of living, some refugees asked their relatives and friends who had been living abroad to send them money. But the refugees were not able to cash the checks they received. The Indonesian officials allowed only checks which were of an emergency nature to be cashed, and other checks were turned over to UNHCR for handling.

9 Ibid.


11 Ibid.

13 Ibid., 24; Nguyen’s Memoirs.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.


18 Linda Hitchcox, 117.

19 Ibid., 118-121.

20 Ibid., 123.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.


24 Ibid., 66-69.


26 Ibid.


28 Ibid.

29 Ibid., 21-22.

30 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
CHAPTER III
THE VIETNAMESE COMMUNITY AT GALANG: COMMON HARDSHIPS, HOPES, AND FEARS

Arriving in Indonesia: The Process of Fleeing Vietnam

Refugees living in Camp Galang comprised a diverse community: ethnic Chinese, ethnic Vietnamese, former veterans involved with the Vietnam War, and unaccompanied children were represented. The refugees had come to Galang by different means and under various circumstances. Despite their different backgrounds, these refugees shared a common feature: they had survived numerous calamities inherent in the perilous journey across the South China sea.

The voyage to Indonesia was dangerous, as most refugees escaped in small, underequipped boats not seaworthy for travelling long distances. Moreover, these boats were mostly equipped with worn-out engines that normally failed to operate after a few days of continuous running. It was also common for refugees to run out of food and water before arriving at their destination. The journey became more risky as the possibility of encountering pirates was high, particularly in the Thailand Bay, where many young women were abducted and raped and thousands of men shot and thrown overboard. According to one estimation in 1989, over 150,000 people had lost their lives at sea. The following personal account of
Son Nguyen will give a glimpse into the process of escape and the ordeals that refugees had endured.

In 1981, twelve-year-old Son Nguyen attempted to leave Vietnam several times. Son was aware of the need to escape but could not anticipate when it would be an auspicious moment to leave. He was old enough to understand local circumstances, but he knew only vaguely what escaping Vietnam might entail. Like many other refugees, he could not perceive the dangers of the trip. He never heard that many people who had left Vietnam because of "communism" had perished at sea.

One day, when Son was at school, his younger brother came and asked him to come home. When he returned home, he saw his parents' sad eyes, and he felt intuitively that it was time to leave Vietnam. After giving him incessant lectures, his parents sent him off. That was the last time he saw them.

Son was told by his parents to disguise himself as a fisherman in order to avoid any suspicion. When the sun began to set, he was sent on a small sampan that was to take him to a larger boat at about midnight. It appeared that the escape was executed according to the plan. By midnight he, along with 65 other people (12 children, 30 women, and 23 men), silently departed Vietnam on a fishing boat 16 meters long and 4 meters wide. The boat was to go to Malaysia.

The first few hours of the escape were completely silent inside the boat; the only noise was the sound of the engine roaring continuously at maximum pitch. Men, women, and children were cramped in the lower cabin and were ordered to remain silent since the boat still had to avoid areas where the Vietnamese coastal guards
might be patrolling. About five hours after the departure, many people, especially women and children, began to get seasick and vomit indiscriminately. Occasionally, infants cried only to be immediately silenced by their mothers. An almost suffocating smell of urine and vomit pervaded the cabin. Although no one had room to move, the captain ordered everyone in the lower cabin to remain there for at least one more day to avoid being discovered.³

The engine ran continuously for two days until it suddenly quit, leaving the boat at the mercy of the winds and tides. The mechanics attempted their best to fix the engine, but to no avail. The refugees were now far from the reach of the patrols, but their fate was beyond their control, for at any moment the boat could capsize in a storm or under an empowering wave. Everyone’s life was imperiled.

The boat drifted off course for the next three days. The captain attempted to make a sail out of large plastic sheets, but it was futile. Fears and the feelings of despair and hopelessness surfaced. People became agitated. Son was frightened, but the more he worried, the more he felt hopeless since he was exhausted, hungry, and thirsty. He brought a small amount of dry food, but that did not last for more than three days. The boat was supposed to carry plenty of food and water as the captain had promised. Unfortunately, one of the sampans that was carrying rice, water, and fruit, failed to meet the boat at a certain time. Fearing that waiting around would jeopardize the plan, the captain had ordered the boat to leave even without that vital food supply.
Sixty-six people were now floating for over a week on the open sea to an unknown destination. People feared that the boat might somehow drift back to Vietnam, where everyone would be jailed indefinitely. The passengers prayed and prayed, and they began to talk frantically, generating ideas to solve the existing problem.

Son did not know anyone on the boat. He realized how unprepared he was compared to others, who had brought with them more essential items (such as food and medicines) than he had. As he thought about his parents and brothers and sisters and how much he missed them, he wondered innocently whether it was, after all, worth it to leave his family behind for something called "the land of freedom," a concept beyond his comprehension. He knew little about what he was to do in an emergency; nor did he have any idea how to survive in a world of strangers.

Fears raced through his mind as he noticed the monstrous, surging waves: "What would I do if the boat sank? What if I ran out of food? What if I were accidentally thrown overboard?" Later, when he was too hungry and thirsty to worry, he ceased to care. The week before he had been at home with his family, and his mom had prepared him a lobster dinner; now he was with a group of strangers, risking his life for a vague ideal that was unimaginable for a 12-year-old boy. The resignation and despair put him and other refugees in a trancelike state. In their stupor, the despair and hopelessness became almost unbearable.

Polite speech and manners were a requisite in Vietnamese social settings. But in a life-and-death struggle situation, such as that
aboard the boat, surviving by whatever means was the only rule that seemed to apply. During that period, it was hard for people to be generous to strangers when they had to take care of their own families and friends. They all were experiencing a kind of "hell" that prevented them from reaching out to one another. Son did not know how to react to people in the manners that he had been taught. To him everything was confusing. During that period, he came not to care whether the world, or life, continued. He often lapsed back into the unconsciousness of sleep. When he woke up, he saw nothing but the monstrous waves pounding against the tiny, fragile boat. He wanted to howl for the sadness, the pain, the anger, the unbearable thirst and hunger—the meaninglessness of it all. He cried, but it was useless. The only thing that kept him struggling was the thought that he had to survive to please his parents; his family would be grief-stricken if they found out that he somehow perished at sea. Could his parents comprehend the kind of torture that he went through?

On the seventh day, the rain poured down. That was both good and bad. The rain provided the water for drinking, but it was the sign of an approaching storm. Shortly after it rained, a thunderbolt struck the horizon, and the waves began to surge. The boat tipped violently from one side to the other, about to be engulfed by the threatening waves. That day all the refugees closed their eyes, believing that it was their last day on earth, for the fragile boat was not equipped to survive such a violent storm. But most people were too exhausted to worry. Fortunately, through some miracle, the
boat endured the storm. But an atmosphere of hopelessness and helplessness still dominated the lower cabin.

The next day the boat encountered some commercial ships, but they all sailed away, fearing to take on the burdensome responsibility of rescuing the refugees. On the twelfth day, fortunately, the refugees encountered some Indonesian fishermen, who generously provided them with food and water and towed them to one of the hundreds of islands in Indonesia. The tow rope broke about twenty-five times as the boat was being pulled, but the fishermen were patient; they circled around each time and continued to tow the boat until it reached the Anambas Archipelago. The refugees were grateful for having been rescued. They stayed on the Anambas and survived on coconut meat given by the natives until the Indonesian authorities from Kuku came and brought them to Kuku Refugee Camp. Two months later, these refugees were transferred to Camp Galang. This fleeing experience had been seared into these refugees' memories.

This episode is unique, but in many ways it illustrates sufficiently the kind of tribulations that thousands of refugees arriving in Camp Galang faced on their journey to freedom. But having had survived the journey was only the beginning of refugee life. Some refugees who came to Camp Galang lived for months and even years in what Gisele Bousquet called "a state of limbo." In such a "limbo-like" state, the refugees at Camp Galang attempted their best to adapt to a new environment, to carry on their customs and traditions, and to express themselves as a community.
Life Inside Camp Galang: Daily Activities

Being detached from their homeland, the Vietnamese in Camp Galang found a vital source of emotional and material support in people who sustained the will to maintain familiar cultural values through ceremony and interpersonal relationships. The following pages will examine different aspects of the Vietnamese community at Galang, a community whose population fluctuated constantly as people moved in and out of the camp.

Camp life appeared monotonous, since there were not many recreational and educational opportunities to explore. The camp residents usually remained in their barracks and waited anxiously to be resettled elsewhere. The following scenario describes a typical day at Galang:

At 8:00 a.m., the broadcasts summarized briefly the events of the day, welcoming new arrivals and bidding farewell to people leaving the camp. After a small breakfast, a few men in their forties settled down to a chess game that continued all morning. Next to them, several teenagers gathered and competed fiercely in a card game, slamming down the cards in front of the opponent with a great flourish and flick of the wrist. A group of young children were chasing each other in and out of the barrack, while their friends outside began to skip in time to a chanted rhyme. They swung two ropes, alternately, and weaved themselves dexterously in and out of the spheres of the swinging ropes, matching the rhythm. In the right corner of the barrack, an artist was painting Vietnam's sceneries; he would later sell or give these paintings to refugees who were about to leave the camp. A baby crawled across the earth, grinning and following the trail of water spilling over from the bowls of washing being pounded by two mothers.

In the heat of the afternoon most people were dozing for a couple of hours. Occasionally, the sudden hoots and
catcalls cut the thick air of the afternoon. Some refugees were reading and studying; others writing letters. Cheerful letters were written to their relatives in Vietnam and sad ones to their relatives living abroad so that they would keep sending money. Occasionally, visitors dashed in and out of the barrack. An elderly man sat cross-legged on a mat contemplating and writing poems. A few yards from him, the topic of resettlement dominated the conversation of a group of people in their late thirties.

The talk suddenly switched to the quality of the rice and the price of vegetables as the afternoon slid into dusk. Outside on the barrack platforms, the charcoal cooking stoves were lit for the evening meal. Near the main doorway, a man in his late fifties rocked gently in the hammock he had occupied all day, staring at the smoke rings that he blew up to the ceiling. The occasional bursts of laughter and cry of the babies marked the end of an uneventful day, as the sun slowly disappeared in the distance.

Despite the inevitable boredom in the camp, there were religious and athletic activities for those who were willing to participate. Camp life could be meaningful for people who were active and who received money continually from friends and relatives living abroad. Refugees who had brought gold and valuables with them could afford to live a relatively luxurious lifestyle. On Sundays, especially, these people could prepare elaborate picnics on the beach, which was an eight-mile walk from the camp. But whatever their financial circumstances, refugees realized that camp life was just a transitory experience.

In many respects, Camp Galang was like a small, self-sufficient community. There were grocery stores, coffee shops, a post office, and other businesses. Refugee entrepreneurs set up beauty shops, tailor shops, and small eating establishments. Some tended their own gardens and sold the vegetables at the market for
small sums of money. In both Site I and Site II, there was a market for fresh food, and people could shop for necessities on the "Main" Street (Duong Chinh), which was located in site I. At night there were Vietnamese restaurants and cafes, which played loudly the traditional Vietnamese music, music which had been prohibited under the communist government. A fresh-food market provided all the necessary diet and luxurious food for those who could afford them. Down Main Street, shirts, hats, audio tapes, stereos, television sets, and other items were displayed on the stands that the refugees had built out of wood. For those who had money, life in the camp, although limited, symbolized the lost lifestyle in Saigon before 1975, provoking feelings of nostalgia.

Refugees who had no money depended heavily on the rations from the camp administration. Every five days, each person received a ration which consisted of 1.5 kilograms of rice, a small package of dry, green bean, two small packs of sugar and salt, and two cans of meat (usually pork, ham, or mutton). The content basically did not change. The lack of vegetables, which were distributed only once a month, often produced malnutrition and other health problems. The refugees attempted to earn some money for vegetables by forming groups of four or five and sharing their portions of food. Usually by the end of the month they saved a package of rations and could sell it to other refugees for a small amount of money, which they used to buy vegetables or other necessities. Families with small children could do the same, since each person, child or adult, received an equal amount of rations.
There was no natural water supply on the island, except that which could be used for washing. Water was brought in by barges and collected in containers by the refugees at designated zones. People usually took turns carrying the water back to their barrack. Once in a while the tropical rain provided plenty of water for cooking and showering. Each barrack was provided with eight 100-gallon oil barrels to collect the rainwater for later use. Each person got 60 gallons of water a week, which was used for cooking, washing, and showering. Because of such a shortage, the refugees dug wells and used the water for washing and showering.

Life was more comfortable at the Unaccompanied Minor Center (UMC). Children from age 8 to 14 who fled Vietnam without their parents or relatives were required to live in this quarter. There was always abundant water for the unaccompanied children. A well was built and a waterhose was available for these children to wash their clothes and take showers. The administration recognized that these children, being separated from their homes and families, suffered from homesickness and loneliness more than anyone else in the camp. As a result, they gave these children special care and preferential treatment. Two men, one middle-aged and the other in his late twenties, oversaw UMC. In 1982, approximately 60 unaccompanied children (20 girls and 40 boys) lived together in two large barracks, which were specially designed for this purpose.

Most of these children were in their teens, but some were as young as eight or nine years old. In either case, they were expected to behave as adults, be responsible for themselves, and for each other. They did their laundry, and on the weekends, cleaned the
barracks like other refugees in the camp. The children got vegetables frequently, and the meals were prepared by hired chefs. Their diet included fresh vegetables (which were considered a luxury), fresh fish, shrimp, and pork. Each child was provided a mosquito net, another luxury that many refugees could not afford. But living in this center also meant abiding by more rules and having less freedom. For example, the children had a certain curfew, usually 10:00 p.m., when they had to be in bed. Some children who had matured quickly and become independent resented such rules and often became rebellious. Those who broke the rules were severely punished by the directors. They might be forced to kneel for a long period of time, might be forbidden to eat, or, if the case was severe, might even be flogged.

Cleaning in the camp took place on every weekend. During cleaning, all the camp residents, except for small children, weeded outside the barrack, dusted, and took turns cleaning the bathrooms. Garbage was collected by the refugees and towed out to a dump nearby. The barracks were often kept incredibly clean considering that they were located in dusty areas.

Barrack meetings took place on Sunday nights when people could offer suggestions to improve camp life. At these meetings, people presented ideas concerning barrack activities, brought up personal requests to move to another barrack or to another place within the barrack, and resolved conflicts among barrack residents. Sometimes demands for changes within the camp, such as moving the water-collection zone closer to a particular barrack, could be appealed directly to the administration if need be.
There were athletic events, taking place usually on Wednesday afternoons. Soccer, volleyball, and ping-pong were the most popular sports in the camp. Competitive tournaments between the Cambodians and the Vietnamese took place at the dirt field two miles east of the camp. The Vietnamese dominated the soccer and volleyball games; they had a larger population to draw from. The Cambodians, on the other hand, were quite competitive in ping-pong tournaments. These sports provided a pleasant escape from the boredom and promoted good will between these ethnic groups.

As for nighttime activities, many people went to the theaters, which were owned and operated by the local Indonesians. There were three theaters in the camp, two of which often played the martial-arts movies produced by Hong Kong. Other popular activities at night included sitting for hours and conversing with friends at a coffee shop, dancing, and strolling down the Main Street, where many luxurious items were displayed. Those who did not have money to spend often walked to the center of the camp to watch television, which was provided by the administration. Some refugees got together and played card games or Chinese chess, or played the guitar and sang.

Spiritual life was an important aspect of the camp. The Catholic church and the Buddhist pagoda, both of which were located on the highest hills at Galang, were the primary spiritual centers. The Catholic church was located on the north hill, the pagoda on the south hill. After having embarked upon hazardous adventures, the refugees tended to devote more time to their spiritual life. They were anxious about attending religious ceremonies and other
religiously related activities. For some, involvement in religious affairs provided the means to express thanks to their God, whoever that God happened to be. Others simply had a chance to practice their religion. After all, some had escaped Vietnam to seek religious freedom elsewhere.

On another level, the church and the pagoda were the centers of security and comfort. For those who had encountered numerous perils on their escape, these institutions reminded them that, no matter what had happened, God would always be on their side, guiding and helping them through dangerous ventures. For those who had been rejected by the resettlement countries, these religious institutions provided the spiritual strength that helped them to endure the long wait in the camp.

People were very active in religious ceremonies. Mass was conducted twice a day: 9:00 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. Most Catholics in the camp always looked forward to attending Mass on Sundays. They went to church in groups of three and five. The church was located on a high hill (about 300 feet) overlooking the Galang valley. Climbing numerous steps to get to church gave church-goers a special sense of devotion to their religion.

There were also religiously related activities for young children. Every Sunday, from 2 to 4 p.m., the Catholic Boy Scout Organization, consisting of boys and girls from ages 9 to 15, gathered upon the hill where the church was located and split up into groups for activities. While some children learned to read and write English, others participated in games and scavenger hunts. These activities had significant symbolism, as they reminded the children of their
freedom from the constant indoctrinations which took place at schools in Vietnam under the communist regime.

The Buddhist groups within the camp were also active. The Buddhist monks set up Buddhist Boy Scout associations and religious classes for people. These monks also gave advice and counselling to the refugees who had marital problems and who tended to be suicidal. Their goal was primarily to help the adults to worship Buddha and help the children to become involved through scouting activities. They also tried to raise money through the Buddhist associations abroad to help the poor in the camp. Both adults and children frequented the pagoda (Chua), located on the south hill, to pray and take classes. The pagoda, a cool, dark hall smelling of incense and dominated by the statue of Buddha, was made up of several distinctive buildings. Clean, whitewashed walls, joined with an arch of bamboo, enclosed a garden of scattered flower beds and paths. On the right of the pagoda where offerings were made and joss sticks burned, believers could come to visit the monks.

Religious activities were balanced by interpersonal relationships, which were a significant part of the camp experience. When the initial euphoria and relief had faded, the refugee's adjustment to the inevitable anxiety that followed was challenging. Making contacts within the established community would substantially reduce the level of insecurity and boredom. When the new arrivals entered the camp, seeing someone with a familiar face who might have recent news from home was highly possible. Veteran residents often recognized others who had lived in the same village or neighborhood in Vietnam. Those who recognized their
friends were amazed and delighted by such coincidences; they inquired about each other’s escape, recalled mutual acquaintances, and asked about relatives and friends. After such exchanges, they probed their friends about the camp conditions.

People who already lived there often helped the new arrivals to adjust to the confusion of the first few weeks. Those who had escaped together had become familiar with each other, but this familiarity might not always be a positive experience, since some people could not get along after having had conflicts on their journey. Whichever was the case, the refugees who arrived together tended to overlook their past animosities and reconcile with each other, for it was difficult to forget the mutual experience of escaping and sharing many misfortunes on their journey. In Camp Galang people indirectly referred to each other by the number of the boat in which they came, and through gossip, most other refugees were often aware of the story attached to a particular boat number.8

Initially, new arrivals seemed reluctant to form close relationships with the established residents, primarily because they might be leaving shortly after arrival and would have to break new friendships. This reluctance to form close friendships was particularly true with refugees who were transferred to Galang from other camps in Thailand for cultural orientation courses. Eventually, as these refugees realized that they had to remain in the camp for a minimum of six months to complete the paperwork and courses of orientation, they began to form friendships with those who were placed in the same barrack. In a small and isolated community such as Galang, friends became an important source of emotional support,
of information, and of work and leisure activities, thus making the waiting tolerable.\textsuperscript{9}

When they first arrived in Galang, the refugees sought to establish links only with those who had a similar background. In other words, those who had the same ethnic, religious, and occupational identities in Vietnam were most likely to cultivate friendships with each other. In a constantly fluctuating community like Galang, the strongest relationships were based upon what lay in the past and what the future would hold, rather than the present circumstances. Later these were extended to include those people who were accepted by the same country and thus would to some extent share the same future. A minority of the camp population had been rejected by the resettlement countries, and this group was isolated in the Galang community. Other refugees feared that any association with this group might adversely affect their resettlement chances. The refugees who belonged to this "rejected" category were also reluctant to develop ties with each other, for having "bad friends" would further worsen one's own predicament. Associating with teachers and academics was a popular activity of a few long-term residents who hoped to improve their language skills and to make connections with the "elite" within the camp.\textsuperscript{10}

Educated individuals were inclined to associate with one another and also worked together in the agencies and classrooms. People of the same ethnic group, such as Hmong and Chinese, usually arranged to live in the same neighborhoods where they could use their mother tongue. They were also likely to have common occupational backgrounds, such as business and commerce in the
case of the Chinese. Likewise, the ex-military personnel persistently sought out each other.\textsuperscript{11}

The veterans were a noticeable group within the camp. Having fought for the armies of South Vietnam, they shared a perpetual sense of solidarity while living in Galang. Their common past experiences provided a fertile ground for friendships that would continue after resettlement. Other refugees admired them for having fought against communism, and the camp administrators placed this group in a special, respected category. Interviewers, especially Americans, usually did all they could to resettle these men rapidly, for ex-soldiers were clearly subject to persecution in Vietnam, and the United States government had acknowledged that it had a special responsibility to its former allies. Veterans' wives who arrived in Galang without their husbands were also accorded honorary status by the refugee community and by the administration for the same reasons.\textsuperscript{12}

In addition, because of their past association with Americans, the veterans were likely to speak fluent English. They tended to use their linguistic skills to serve as interpreters in the camp, a position highly acclaimed. Together, these men created the Veterans Association, which organized and searched to establish links with the help of various associations situated abroad, including support from American GIs who might remember such individuals. Some of these men had secret military information that was of interest to Western governments.\textsuperscript{13}

Friendships in Camp Galang were also formed between the refugees and Indonesians who were working there. Through English
classes, some Vietnamese students established permanent ties with the Indonesian teachers. Traditionally, when an English course ended, the Indonesian teachers invited their Vietnamese students to a big party at their living quarters, where awards (usually English dictionaries) would be handed out and outstanding students recognized. Positive interaction and friendships between the Vietnamese and Indonesians exemplify the kind of friendliness that prevailed at Camp Galang. Some Indonesian teachers also volunteered to conduct the bible-discussion groups, in which both Vietnamese and Cambodians were welcome. Such activities further forged the ties between different ethnic groups and bridged the gap of cultural differences.14

Interpersonal interactions, together with people's needs to cooperate on work assignments, created a constant flow of movement and interchange of information within the camp. News concerning resettlement prospects or from Vietnam spread rapidly, fuelled by rumor, gossip, and misconception. Markets, shops, cafes, and the letter-collection points, where there were always queues of people gathered, were the important places for meetings and gossip.15

Although the Vietnamese attempted to build a strong community at Galang, their main aim was to leave the camp as soon as possible. This striking paradox of sustaining people in familiar surroundings so that they could learn Western values necessary for leaving the camp at the earliest moment weakened the sense of community at Galang. Refugees found it difficult to commit themselves to improving the "ethos" of the community as a whole when all of their attention was concentrated upon leaving it as soon
as possible. A few capable leaders, ironically, often departed after a relatively short interval. Thus, strong leadership within the community was rare.16

All levels of behavior in the camp inevitably were subject to subtle change. Upon leaving their homeland, refugees were forced to break ties with old friends and relatives, and on their journey, they faced numerous traumatic experiences that could later impair their ability to adjust to camp conditions. Since the camp environment was in many aspects different from that in Vietnam, people who failed to adapt to new circumstances became discouraged, apathetic, and even resentful.17

Vietnamese came from a variety of backgrounds—different ethnic groups, religions, educations, skills, and social classes—but all acknowledged to one another their common sense of loss and grief. The refugees all professed a common attitude: "We are all refugees now; we must stay together." It was through such common feelings that a diverse community such as Galang was held together.18

On the other hand, subtle tensions among refugees also existed. In the camp all the intimacies of family life must occur within an area only large enough to allow everyone sufficient room for a bed or a sleeping mat. In such restricted settings, the lack of privacy strained adult relationships. Some refugees screened their spaces with large pieces of fabric or paper to prevent intrusions. But even then, conversations were easily overheard by neighbors, and negative rumors propagated rapidly.19 Arguments over living space and other issues occasionally erupted into violence.20
The emotional bonding that took place as the result of being a refugee at Galang was strong. But, since refugees would often end up in different places, this relationship was not usually sustained beyond arrival in the third country. The family units, however, were an exception. For the Vietnamese, family members do not have to be related by affinity or kinship. In Vietnam the close family group extends outward to include the brothers and sisters of both parents and their offspring and sometimes extends beyond that to include friends and neighbors.²¹

The size of the family group varied; often parents travelled separately, each taking some of the children, but occasionally a large group managed to stay together. The most common unit consisted of three or four members, with parents left behind in Vietnam and other sons and daughters resettled abroad. Families that arrived together were housed together and regarded by the authorities as units in making their application for resettlement.²²

Having left their families and friends behind, all refugees but the smallest children were usually afflicted with the feeling of loss and homesickness. This feeling was, however, alleviated by the presence of the family that was able to share memories. Most families were forced to live with the reality of the permanent fragmentation of their tight-knit unit.²³

In the camp, the men did not appear to adapt as well to the camp environment as did women. Since the Vietnamese society is patriarchal, the men are regarded as “breadwinners” of the family. In the camp, besides working for the agencies and administration, there was little meaningful employment for men. Thus, the males
often felt helpless because they were unable to find employment to fulfill their traditional role of providing for their family outside the home. Even if, with some considerable ingenuity, these men found work, the employment often lacked purposefulness, especially if they knew their resettlement was in doubt. In a sense, even the most active individuals struggled against feelings of pointlessness. As time passed, the male heads of family tended to become increasingly inert and apathetic.\textsuperscript{24}

Women, who were known for keeping themselves occupied with domestic matters (such as food preparation, washing, and child-caring) seemed to cope better on a day-to-day basis than men. Women were also famous for their skills in marketing, including selling goods, and making clothes, hammocks, and the like. Providing services to other women, such as manicuring and hairdressing, also kept some women extremely busy.\textsuperscript{25}

In the camp women took much care in preparing food, even if a family was living entirely on a ration allowance. Before cooking the rice the women washed it at least three times in a special container and sorted out any poor-quality grains and foreign bodies. They then cooked it according to a rigid formula that determined the amount of water, the adding of salt, and the sealing of the pot so that it reached the desired consistency. Vegetables were prepared with equal care, each part being separately washed and cut into regular, often artistic shapes before being briefly plunged into hot oil or water. When the food was prepared, people rapidly helped themselves with handmade chopsticks and bowls. A rice-based soup, flavored with a little fish sauce or chili, was a popular food that
women prepared for breakfast. The midday and evening meals consisted of stir-fried meat, and sometimes vegetables, with plenty of rice. French bread rolls, spread with meat and curried vegetables, could be bought at the market.26

Some refugees worked in Camp Galang. The workers were divided into two main categories: those who volunteered to work for the administration and the agencies, and entrepreneurs who served the needs of fellow refugees. Most refugees were not paid for their services, but found rewards in other ways, such as by becoming informed about the work of their agency and learning English. Assistants not only benefited from the privileges gained through access to information and increased status, but also had another living space during the day. Here they could socialize with other volunteers, worked and listened to radios between tasks, and had a temporary respite from the noise and overcrowding of the refugee dwellings. Some workers turned their office into a painting studio, a place that they could also use for socializing at night. Volunteers, in short, appreciated having access to an alternative living area and good bathroom facilities.27

The work usually brought the volunteers into contact with other refugees in such activities as handing out goods, acting as an interpreter, teaching English, and working in the library. Their work raised their status among the refugees and accorded them special privileges. Language skills and contact with an agency were highly valued, mainly because of the link with resettlement prospects.28

Other refugees operated their own businesses. Some of these people had money sent to them from relatives and friends abroad,
and they used this money to embark upon entrepreneurship ventures, such as opening a restaurant, a coffee shop, or a grocery store; others had brought enough gold with them to start a business right away. A popular way of earning a living was to set up a small shop along Main Street, primarily selling cigarettes, toothpaste, soap, and other items. A few also tended their own gardens and sold the vegetables to other refugees at the market. The people who owned these businesses tended to be those who stayed for a long period in the camp. For these refugees, Camp Galang became a resettlement institution in itself. Later, when they left, they passed or sold their business to other relatives or friends who had recently arrived.29

Some offered their services as tailors, barbers, carpenters, or repairmen. A minority might buy goods illegally through local traders who ran the shops and markets within the camps; others operated their own currency exchange for refugees receiving money from abroad. The money earned from these activities, although usually a small sum, was quickly spent on extra food and daily necessities. These jobs helped the time to pass quickly. More importantly, having entrepreneurship responsibilities gave the people a sense of that they were not wasting their lives in the camp, but were creative in using their own skills and resources to manage their affairs.30

Religious Festivals and Cultural Celebrations

The Vietnamese refugees at Galang tried to celebrate their major cultural festivals and religious events, whatever their constraints of camp life and circumstances. In May, the Buddhists
celebrated *Wesak*, a festival to commemorate Buddha’s birth, enlightenment, and death. Christmas and Easter, on the other hand, were the two most significant events on the calendar for the Catholics. Although these religious events were important, Tet and leave-taking will receive much greater emphasis here, since they were the most widely celebrated events in Camp Galang. These events were an expression of the Vietnamese sense of themselves as a community.\(^{31}\)

In Vietnamese culture Tet is the most important festival of the year. Depending on the phase of the new moon, Tet takes place some time between the end of January and mid-February. Traditionally, celebrations last two weeks, but in the camp, because of financial and other constraints, three days of celebration would be adequate. Shortly before Tet approaches, cleaning the house is a popular custom. The cleaned house should be decorated with new curtains, tablecloths, and furniture to represent newness and prosperity. Everyone in the family must wear new clothes at Tet. The refugees in Camp Galang followed these traditions as closely as possible, making sure to wear new, or at least clean, clothes, and cleaning thoroughly the barracks, especially the bathrooms and platforms. Elaborate food, such as crystallized coconut strips, sour tamarind seeds, and ginger, were prepared at Tet. A meal at Tet always includes vegetables and fruit which are preserved in salt or sugar. *Dua cai* (salt green) pressed with onion are especially popular for this occasion. Refugees who could afford the unique, and often expensive, food ingredients prepared *banh tet* (the New Year cake).\(^{32}\)
In Vietnam Tet is a time to pay respect and gratitude to the elders and ancestors. Traditionally, five days before Tet begins, elderly relatives were visited and presented with gifts. Families made offerings to, and whitewashed, the graves of ancestors during the twelfth month. Such activities, however, were not possible in the camp. A week before Tet, the Vietnamese refugees honored the kitchen god Ong Tao with the raising of a bamboo pole, seventy-five feet high, in the center of the camp. On top of the pole were leafy branches and firecrackers for joy and peace, a yellow flag, cakes of rice and salt for health and strength, and a parcel containing gifts for the gods. On this day Ong Tao traditionally returns to the celestial realm to report to the Jade Emperor on the activities and progress of the family in the previous year, and he is welcomed back on the night of Tet. While the pole was raised, every family in the camp cleaned the barracks thoroughly, especially the kitchen area. This was to get rid of the old year's bad spirit. The Vietnamese pay special attention to scrubbing and polishing the floors an hour before Tet approaches. Symbolically, this is to sweep the bad spirits out and to make clean space for the good spirits to arrive. The household which has a clean floor will obtain much luck in the new year. Once Tet begins, no more sweeping will take place until Tet is over; otherwise good spirits will be swept away and bad luck will be suffered for the rest of the year. In the camp, hand-made branches were placed upright in front of the barracks' doorways and were decorated to look like the blossoms of hoa mai and hoa dao, the favorite flowers for Tet. At midnight the fire-crackers were lit to
welcome back the good spirits and everybody wished each other happy New Year.\textsuperscript{33}

The kind of person who first crosses the threshold after midnight is important. Usually only morally upright people who are in good health and who do not owe money or suffer any handicap are allowed to do so. The Vietnamese thus choose someone to be their first visitor. This visitor is an honored guest who is welcomed with special food and drink, particularly water-melon fruit and seeds. Even the melon is chosen carefully. According to Vietnamese culture, the deeper the red color of the fruit, the better will be the luck for the following year.\textsuperscript{34}

At midnight, a large public ceremony began in the square of the camp, where the library and the administrative buildings were located. Previously, a group of volunteers had made a dragon out of paper consisting of a large painted head and a tapering flexible body. Some men in their early twenties had volunteered to take the dragon in turns to leap and dance about beneath the mask and tail. As the drum beat incessantly, louder and louder, the dragon proceeded toward the center of the square. Meanwhile, two lines of four people, wearing traditional Vietnamese dress, came up each side of the square toward the stage at the end. They bore a pig’s head, watermelon, \textit{banh tet}, and bottles of wine. Three gold-robed figures received these foods from the bearers and placed them on an altar on the stage, continually chanting as they did so. When the dragon reached the square a kind of teasing game took place. The dragon tried to catch the gifts dangling on top of the poles in front of him. He was eventually allowed to have these gifts, including the package
which was placed high over the front of the stage. The dragon climbed and amidst much laughter, he finally managed to reach it.

Celebrations continued all night with the distribution of the offerings, together with singing and dancing to encourage the ancestors to join the gathering. The next few days were time for the Vietnamese to visit each other in their barracks, instead of visiting relatives as they would normally do. They brought, and exchanged, gifts of food and stayed to drink wine and played cards and other games. A host must have plenty of food in his home because that signifies that there will be an abundance for the rest of the year. Tet is also a time when the children look forward to receiving money in red envelopes from their parents. Usually, the older a child, the more money he will be given. Likewise, children in Vietnam would receive money from their aunts and uncles, along with good wishes for the new year.35

Traditionally, family members come together at Tet and celebrate; some travel hundreds of miles to be in their native villages for the holiday. The refugees in Galang celebrated the festival with ambivalence. Since Tet is normally so family oriented, the refugees became homesick as the day approached; this was especially true for the unaccompanied minors, who wished they could be with their families more than anyone else in the camp. Most refugees appeared cheerful and they were active in the celebration, but such events inevitably triggered memories. The inner sadness of separation from their families further created an underlying tension within the refugees.36
Another important celebration was that of leave-taking. As soon as refugees had been accepted by the third country, they began to direct their attention away from the camp and toward their future prospects. Those who were going to the same country became conscious of themselves as a separate group whose interest centered upon finding out as much as possible about the new homeland. The governments of most countries arranged a short course of orientation classes that the refugees attended in the last few months of waiting for final medical clearance and notice of departure. Theoretically, they were removed by their new circumstances from the expectations and worries of other refugees that they had also shared previously, but it was sometimes difficult for those leaving to maintain a detached state of mind.37

When the broadcasts announced the names of those who were to go to the Intergovernmental Committee for Migration (ICM) office, everyone knew what that meant: time to leave the camp. People who heard of such news were delighted and did all they could to celebrate. The celebration often went through a series of traditional events. The first event was breakfast at the cafe run by Vietnamese. Friends were invited to this event and, depending on the money available, sometimes all the people living in the same barrack were also welcome to come. The guests could choose their favorite, most delicious food at the restaurant. There was much talking and laughing. Strangers who walked by the cafe usually could tell that someone was about to leave the camp; they found out which refugees were leaving and congratulated them. Eventually people planned for the evening meal, deciding which recipes to use, what kind of beer to
buy, and where the food should be prepared. The people who were leaving had to shop for the food, and with some money left, they bought presents and new clothes. They preferred to leave the camp in new clothes rather than the ones they had worn as inhabitants. Moreover, the old clothes could be passed on to their friends.

That night, friends gathered and talked, drank rice wine, had a fancy meal of chicken or spare ribs, and played cards. Guitars were brought out, and people sang their favorite, usually farewell, songs. The party continued all night, as possessions—books, radios, furnitures, blankets—were bequeathed to friends in the camp. Strangers also came to ask that their letters be mailed in the third country. Since for some refugees this was the only means of sending mail to their relatives and friends abroad, each person who left for the third country often agreed to collect and mail as many as 300 letters.38

The conversation consisting of jokes and reflections of camp life continued well into the night. The people became more sad as they realized that they had to leave their friends, and the fond memories, behind. But they were also anxious to embark upon a new life. They looked nervous and were full of emotion as they made their last goodbyes. The next day, the broadcasts wished them good luck and briefly said farewell to them, playing, as they always did in case of departure, the "When Will I See You Again" song. After that, their friends walked them to the port eight miles away where they would head to Singapore for their flights to the resettlement countries. At the port, their friends waved to them as the ship
slowly faded out of sight. Back in the camp, people listlessly tried to get back into the routine of the day.\textsuperscript{39}
ENDNOTES


2 Unpublished Memoirs of Son B. Nguyen, Carroll College, Helena, Montana, 1992 (hereafter, Nguyen's Memoirs). Successful escapes required elaborate planning, for the seashores were strictly patrolled. Before leaving, the organizers had to take several steps. First, they had to get access to travel at sea. Those who wished to buy or sell their boats also needed a special permit from the Office of Marine Products. Boats were not allowed to pass from the river into the sea without a valid permit. Second, they had to determine which route to take, depending on the point of departure and the season. Third, they had to assemble a sufficient amount of food and water for everyone, and enough fuel to last at least a week at sea. The communist government was suspicious of people who bought fuel and dry food in large qualities, and the same was true with purchasing navigation equipment, such as compasses, binoculars, and maps—signs of an intended escape. These things had to be smuggled to the boat. Fuel, for example, could only be smuggled out to the boat a few gallons at a time. City people were not allowed to walk along the coast at night. If they did, they could be jailed without question. It was common for escapes to fail because of inadequate planning.

Cheating often occurred, as in the case when the owner exaggerated the size of the boat and the level of planning. Since people often had to put their trust in strangers, they were always vulnerable to cheating and betrayal.

Once the necessary equipment was acquired, the trip usually took place on a dark night when the tide was favorable. Everyone was instructed to meet at a certain place at an exact time, because it was dangerous for the boat to wait around. At different places along the estuary sampans would pick up three to five refugees at a time and bring them to the large boat waiting at sea to carry them from Vietnam. It was not unusual that more people arrived than there were places on the boat. Relatives or friends might hear about an escape attempt and secretly follow the passengers to the meeting place. Most often, these "hitch-hikers" were poor and could not afford to purchase their place. They were usually taken on board out of sympathy or to prevent the plan from being discovered. Boats that carried hitch-hikers most of the
time ended up without having enough food and water for everyone. Moreover, because of the nature of the escape, which was executed under secrecy, it was common that some sampans failed to meet the larger boat and were left behind. As a result, many families were separated. Successfully escaping the Vietnamese coastal guards would only be the beginning of a perilous journey ahead.

3 The next four pages contain information from Nguyen’s Memoirs.

4 For similar personal accounts of the escape experience, see James Freeman, Hearts of Sorrow: Vietnamese-American Lifes (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1989).


7 The next ten pages contain information from Nguyen’s Memoirs.


9 Linda Hitchcox, 232-236.

10 Ibid.; Nguyen’s Memoirs.

11 Linda Hitchcox, 236-248.


13 Ibid.

14 Nguyen’s Memoirs.

15 Ibid.; Linda Hitchcox, 238-245.

16 Ibid.


18Ibid.

19It is interesting to note that the crowded conditions at Camp Galang were in many ways similar to those in the camps where Japanese Americans were detained during World War II. For a detailed discussion of life in the relocation camps, see Yoshiko Uchida, Desert Exile: The Uprooting of a Japanese-American Family (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1989).

20Nguyen’s Memoirs.


22Ibid., 224.

23Nguyen’s Memoirs.

24Ibid.


26Ibid.; Nguyen’s Memoirs.

27Nguyen’s Memoirs.


29Nguyen’s Memoirs.


31Ibid.

32Ibid. There is a legend concerning the making of this cake that explains why ordinary ingredients are used. Many years ago a King of Vietnam sent his children to different countries and asked them to bring back the dish that they thought was the best one for the national food. The older children travelled far away and came back with very elaborate and expensive dishes, but the youngest was not able to travel so she lay down and slept. In her dreams she saw banh tet being made
from the ingredients that she ate every day. When she woke up she described the making of this cake to her father and he was so impressed by the cheapness and simplicity of the recipe that he ordered that henceforth it would be the national food for the New Year, because it consists of the principal foods that sustain the Vietnamese.

The cake requires lengthy preparation. Sticky rice is soaked in water for twenty-four hours. Meanwhile the husks from green mung beans are removed with great care and patience, and the beans are boiled to a mush. Streaky pork is cut into small pieces, and banana leaves are gently softened in the heat, cut into strips, and laid on the floor. Next, a layer of sticky rice is placed on the banana leaf and then covered with a layer of beans. Pork is placed on the beans and covered with two more layers of beans and rice. The banana leaf is rolled and tied into a tight bundle that is then boiled for two days.

Sometimes fuel shortages reduce the length of time for which it can be boiled, but people usually continue cooking the cakes until midnight on the day before Tet. Everyone is expected to cook at the same time. At Galang each household had a fire on which was placed a large can of boiling water containing perhaps eight or ten sausage-like cakes. It was constantly tended by members of the group.

33Nguyen’s Memoirs.

34Ibid.; Linda Hitchcox, 248-249.

35Ibid.

36Nguyen’s Memoirs.

37Ibid.

38Ibid.

39Ibid.
CHAPTER IV
CONCLUSION

This thesis examines the transit experience of refugees in Camp Galang. While the refugee experience is in itself a topic for extended study, it is also part of the larger picture, namely, the Vietnam war and its legacies. Throughout its history, Vietnam has experienced numerous catastrophes and has been torn by social fragmentation deriving from pervasive foreign influence and ethnic and religious differences. The disintegration of Vietnamese society, which neither South Vietnamese nor American leadership could prevent, made it more difficult to mobilize the South Vietnamese for the bloody struggle against the communists. Ultimately, the communists, who prevailed with their takeover of Saigon in April of 1975, introduced a repressive political ideology that was to be the symbol of life in Vietnam after the war. This event thus signified the beginning of one of the most tumultuous eras in Vietnam’s history.

When the communists controlled Vietnam, Vietnamese customs and egalitarian traditions were replaced with alien political values. From the Vietnamese communist point of view, there was no room for a non-political individual. Communist maxims were the standards for proper social and religious behavior; communism was the way of life. In opposition to these drastic changes, hundreds and
thousands of people have fled Vietnam to preserve a set of values that they believed to be threatened under the communist regime.

On their journey to freedom, the Vietnamese refugees, often known as "boat people," encountered numerous dangers, risking their lives in exchange for an opportunity that would eventually allow them to reestablish traditional patterns of life. Many of these refugees drowned, died of starvation and dehydration, or were killed by Vietnamese coastal guards or by Thai pirates. The decision to leave Vietnam is thus a matter of gambling with one's life in exchange for individual values that are not sustained under the communist regime. In any case, nearly a million Vietnamese who fled their country risked death rather than staying in Vietnam. Most refugees survived the horrors, but many were psychologically devastated by their experiences.

After having survived numerous hardships, many refugees tended to have high expectations of the treatment that they would receive in the camps. Refugee camps in Southeast Asia, regrettably, were not always what the refugees had expected. These camps varied in the harshness of living conditions and also in the treatment of refugees by camp guards and officials. While most host countries cared humanely for the refugees at the start of the exodus, they eventually became exhausted by the burden of the constant influx of refugees. Some even neglected, and in a few instances brutalized, refugees, as in the case of Khao I Dang Refugee Camp in Thailand and the Hei Ling Chau camp in Hong Kong.

Those refugees who were disappointed with the treatment they received often did not realize that successfully escaping
Vietnam was only the first step in the life of a refugee. Most refugees, however, were able to use the skills they had gained from surviving the social and political upheavals in Vietnam, and later from enduring the hazardous journey across the sea, to adapt successfully to new circumstances. On the other hand, those who were not resettled easily or quickly had a devastating experience. These refugees lived in “limbo,” unable to be placed in a third country, but also unable to return to Vietnam. Members of this group grew increasingly helpless and resentful as they ceased to believe in their ability to influence new circumstances. Such a negative experience could have a debilitating effect on these people's ability to adjust to a life beyond the camp.

The refugees who arrived in Indonesia considered Camp Galang humane. While living in Camp Galang, Vietnamese refugees had to comply with certain laws and patterns of behaviors established by the camp administration. Despite these constraints of camp life, refugees living in Galang attempted to reconstruct what being a Vietnamese meant by carrying on their customs and traditions, even though in a limited way. The interactions between Indonesians and Vietnamese seemed positive, and friendships between these two groups established a friendly environment at Galang. An atmosphere of hope and excitement also prevailed among refugees who were on the brink of departure for their new countries.

There were, however, some inherent problems because of the nature of the camp. Perhaps the most insidious problem, which was to be found in even a humane camp like Galang, was that of boredom
and enforced idleness. In some instances violence and family tension developed from these circumstances.

Overall, the refugees at Galang exhibited an extraordinary will to overcome obstacles that might disrupt lives. They found emotional and spiritual support in interpersonal relationships with other refugees who had great courage and determination. It was through such emotional bonding that refugees could become resilient and resourceful in coping with the crises at hand. While living in the camp, some refugees professed a remote dream of someday being able to return to Vietnam.

The refugee experience has been the subject of many books, magazine articles, films, and television documentaries. Nonetheless, what is often missing in these accounts is the time refugees spend in the camps. The camp experience, as mentioned earlier, can have a profound impact on the refugees' view of their ability to cope with trying circumstances. This topic is only vaguely understood by many Americans. Living in an abundant and free society, it is sometimes extremely difficult to perceive the kind of life that Vietnamese refugees live. To better understand the Vietnamese as persons, and to see a complete picture of what being a refugee entails, one cannot ignore their transitory experience of living in the camp.
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