

# Humans in a boat

CLOSE TO HOME

By DAVID CAMPICHE

Three men fishing in a small boat off the mouth of the Columbia River. Three sitting, one talking. Talking about a moment from the past, 40 years ago. The listeners are rapt.

Back then, the days were interminably long. Helplessly adrift, 60 refugees in a boat, somewhere off South Vietnam on a big ocean — no food, no engine — prayed for survival. Pirates took it all. Left them adrift. 60 human beings were cast to the wind and tide. On day six of their epic journey — drifting, drifting — a fishing boat pulled alongside.

“Here,” the sailors said, “60 small raw fish. Here, five gallons of water. Take, eat, drink.”

Each of the 60 players got little better than a sip. They were all South Vietnamese, a stigma not overlooked by the North Vietnamese, the victors of decades of war against the Chinese, the French and finally the Americans. The year was 1975. By now, three foreign armies had deserted Vietnam.

The fishing boat disappeared on the blue horizon. Nothing but sea. The sea and prayers. A blazing sun beat down. Hopelessly adrift, babies cried in their mothers’ arms. Mostly, they had run out of tears.

On day nine, the boat grounded on a Malaysian beach. The survivors were summarily thrown into a refugee camp. It was already stuffed with suffering South Vietnamese. All were unwanted.

Before the boat, there were plenty of injustices. The war was over, and retribution had just begun. Bo Tran was interned in a North Vietnam labor camp. Every day, says Bo, 10 or 15 human beings were gunned down inside the prison walls. Don’t look, he says. Don’t make eye contact with the assassins. Don’t open your mouth — that is, other than to eat a single spoiled tomato for breakfast and a cup of rice for dinner. That’s all folks. That’s all there is. For six months that was all there was. The day Bo was released — that day (How? Why?) — the man with a steely impassive face and steady brown eyes, planned his escape. A yellow boat on a great blue sea — pour family and relatives in that fragile craft. Pray to the Lord.

Back in Malaysia — after the boat — the days remained bleak, until finally, there was a break. A Christian group in the United States essentially paid bail. Sixty immigrants were delivered into the greatest nation on earth, the land of the free. The same nation that had waged war on their very country for a decade and lost nearly 60,000 brave young men.



PHOTO BY DAVID CAMPICHE

After the Vietnam War, Bo Tran, who is South Vietnamese, survived a labor camp, being helplessly adrift in a boat on the ocean, and a refugee camp before immigrating to America as a refugee. He shared his story recently with columnist David Campiche while fishing on the Columbia River.

The Viet Cong were resourceful but still sacrificed over a million people. Who ever wins at war?

Bo arrived in California penniless. His first job was washing dishes for two bucks an hour. Rent devoured that. Twenty family members crowded into a small apartment. Everybody contributed. Bo eventually graduated to pantry and then to line cook. Five years later he was pulling \$15 an hour as a capable chef. California dreaming, he thought.

Bo bought a small house. During off hours — there weren’t many — he fixed it up. Later, he sold it. He bought a restaurant and then lost the business. Rallied again. He was becoming good at that. He put money down on a larger home, an investment for his future. Then another miracle: His Caucasian boss offered Bo a deal.

“I’ll back you. I’ve made a lot of money this way.

At larger real estate. Gamble more, make more. You game?”

Is the Pope Catholic? With assistance, Bo bought a four-unit apartment.

Bo was on his way to the coveted American Dream. The Vietnamese man worked long hard days, seven a week, often 12 hours a day, to cover that dream. Here in American, he earned his way. His daughter, Linda, is now an attorney in a Seattle law firm, a brilliant student and high-achiever. Like her father, she blossomed like a rose.

The political debate this year of 2016 remains, to say the least, contentious. Much of that debate centers around immigration and its consequences. To be or not to be? To stay or return to persecution, in some cases, torture and death. Bo and his family know reality. They know the hard ball and the long ball. And honestly, they are going nowhere outside the shores of North America. But what if they hadn’t been served a pitch to hit? What if they weren’t given a chance? America is about opportunity. You know: Grab the tail of the comet, and hang on fiercely.

Ask yourself: Who built America? Wasn’t it the immigrant? Wasn’t it the English pilgrims who stole the land from Native Americans? Wasn’t it the Irish, Germans, Chinese, Japanese? And all the others. Millions and millions of others, including tens of millions of Hispanics. Indeed, huge parts of this land had been their land. They were just coming home.

How about the African American? They came as slaves. They overcame immense odds. In many current situations, they are still overcoming immense odds. And who are your heroes: Jackie Robinson, Martin Luther King Jr., John F. Kennedy or Albert Einstein? Maybe, if you knew him, that person might be Bo Tran.

I met this quiet capable man fishing on my brother’s fishing boat. Pirates didn’t interrupt us and steal all of our jewelry and dollars. Didn’t steal our outboard and leave us adrift for nine days. Had they, we might have lost hope. We might have suffered and died. No, it didn’t happen. We caught a few fat salmon and went home happily. Our home is America, a generous country with open arms.

What do we get in exchange? We get Bo Tran and his capable daughter, and millions of strong backs and good minds that work long and hard. We get common Americans. We get brilliant Americans, physicists and teachers, doctors and nurses. You know them. They are our neighbors and our community.

And we are all in that boat together.