



Vietnamese-Americans give back

By Richard Halloran

Clad only in her bathing suit, Mylene Tran Huynh fled from Vietnam in 1976 when she was 9 years old with her family in a crowded, open boat that brought them, exhausted, to the Philippines. There, the Red Cross and an American church got the family to America. Today, she is a doctor and a lieutenant colonel in the United States Air Force.

Quang Pham's father, Hoa, managed to get his wife, three young daughters and 10-year-old son, Quang, onto an airplane out of Saigon just before it was captured by the North Vietnamese in 1975. Ten years later, Quang Pham joined the Marine Corps and flew helicopters in Somalia and in Desert Storm against Iraq in 1991.

Trinh Warner's mother and stepfather, H. Ross Warner, left Vietnam in 1974 intending to send for Trinh and four siblings staying with their grandmother. As Saigon was about to fall, the five children were taken to the U.S. Embassy, where several thousand Vietnamese were trying to claw their way aboard departing U.S. helicopters.

They found their stepfather's friend, a big American named Jim, who told the Marine guards the five children were his and his wife's. They were plucked off the embassy roof, and later the children were reunited with their parents in San Francisco. Today, Trinh Warner is a lawyer and a captain in the U.S. Air Force, on duty in Baghdad.

After their harrowing escapes from Vietnam, many Vietnamese-Americans are serving throughout the U.S. armed forces today as a way, Huynh said, of giving back to America for having provided them safe haven. Pham, now a business executive in California, agreed, saying he went into Marine Officer Candidate School "to pay back my citizenship to our country."

In Hawai'i alone, Lt. Col. Lynda Vu is chief of medical staff at Hickam Air Force Base. Maj. Tuan Ton, an Army infantryman, is a staff officer at Pacific Command, working on Southeast Asian issues. Another Army major, Hung Nguyen, is a medical officer.

Warner actually has served three times, enlisting after high school because, she says, "I was not ready to go to college." She left active duty to go into a Reserve program and was called back during Desert Storm. After graduating from Fresno State in California, she earned a law degree at the Howard University School of Law in Washington, D.C. When al-Qaida terrorists mounted the attacks on New York and the Pentagon that killed nearly 3,000 people on Sept. 11, 2001, she volunteered to return to the Air Force as a lawyer.

Just how many Vietnamese-Americans are in our armed forces is unclear. Neither the Pentagon nor various Vietnamese-American civic organizations seemed to know. The Census Bureau says there were 1.2 million Vietnamese in America in 2000, up from 10,000 in 1970. Most are concentrated south of Los Angeles, in San Jose, Calif., and in Houston.

After the end of the war in Vietnam, the first wave of South Vietnamese escaped from their new communist rulers around 1975. A second wave, many fleeing in small boats, began in 1979 and continued into the 1980s, in some months numbering 50,000 refugees. An estimated one-third of them perished at sea.

Some of the Vietnamese-Americans in the service have followed in their fathers' footsteps. Pham's father had been a pilot in the South Vietnamese air force. In his book, "A Sense of Duty," Pham wrote

of his father: "I wanted to relieve him of a loser's guilt, a husband's regret, a father's remorse. Most of all, I wanted him to know that he stood for respectability — for duty, honor and country."

Huynh's father was a doctor and a paratrooper in the South Vietnamese army who passed the medical exam in Virginia to resume his practice. She graduated from the University of Virginia's medical school, where she met and married her husband, Thanh Quoc Huynh, a graduate of Virginia Polytechnic Institute who also fled Vietnam in a boat. They have three sons.

In recent years, Huynh has been back to Vietnam twice on international medical missions, and once on a personal visit with her parents. While it was good to keep in touch with her roots, she said, she was saddened by Vietnam's poverty, particularly of the children.

"We have so much here in the U.S.," she said. "When I see the children in Vietnam, I think how lucky we are. Those could have been my children."

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