

Viet family's Fresno reunion ends 8-year flight to freedom

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After their 18th attempt to escape Vietnam, after months disguised as rural villagers, after aborted dashes at sea living on tiny rations of water in cramped, rickety boats, Le-Huong Do and three children landed Wednesday in Fresno.

Do, two sons and a daughter flew to Fresno to be reunited with her other son, who arrived in Fresno last year, and with other family members she had not seen for eight years.

Do's parents led the welcoming party.

Her father is Gen. Mau Do, who was head of intelligence and security for the South Vietnamese government before the fall of Saigon in 1975. He had been vice premier of Vietnam in 1965.

Wednesday, Gen. Do was a happy, sobbing grandfather, crying aloud, dabbing his eyes with a white handkerchief and hugging his family.

Their conversation in Vietnamese and English featured words all but forgotten by many Americans who do not want to remember the Vietnam War.

"Tet, the Vietnamese Lunar New Year will be Feb. 13," Dung Do of Fresno said as his sister, niece and nephews got off the plane. "This will be one of the best New Years we've ever had."

The conversation mentioned Tet, crossfires, relocation camps, rice paddies, hiding and capture — terms from a painful time in a violent place.

For Le-Huong Do and her family, trouble in Vietnam did not end with the war. But she now misses only her husband, who also escaped and waits to come to Fresno from Malaysia.

The family saga of separation has almost ended. It has included hiding, arrest, forced labor and hunger made worse because the government took away the family's food rations.

Gen. Do, his wife and eight of their nine children escaped from Vietnam during confusion of the fall of Saigon. Le-Huong Do is the ninth child.

In 1975 Le-Huong, her husband and their children were caught in a crossfire while attempting to leave the country. They had to turn back and became separated from the rest of the family.

The Dos had been elite members of the society. They would win no popularity contests in a communist Vietnam.

They recalled their experiences Wednesday, and as they did it was clear they had been dedicated anti-communists, partisans during the long war and branded suspects afterward.

"After the war, everybody had to have a picture of [communist leader] Ho Chi Minh on the wall above the altar," said Le-Huong Do. "Neighbor children asked us where our picture was. We had to go to the market and buy one."

"What goes on there is beyond the wildest imagination," said Dung Do, now Fresno airports operations manager.

Le-Huong Do's husband was head of a religious university in Saigon. With her parents safe in the United States, she and her husband plotted to get out.

They started by leaving Saigon and disguising themselves as farmers.

"For two months we grew rice," Le-Huong Do said. "I had never done that in my life. I was daughter of a general and was not used to that."

She feared that rural folk might recognize her as an outsider, mentioning "long fingers and lighter skin," which she said are signs of more affluent city-dwellers.

Le-Huong Do had put her children in used, dirty clothes and had them run barefoot during a months-long rural exile. Sympathizers hid them in huts. They had left Saigon illegally.

They had no identification card for food and lacked papers authorizing them to be out of the capital. Their homes had been confiscated.

One son, 11-year-old Truong Thanh Mai, escaped to Indonesia with an uncle in 1981 and arrived in Fresno last year.

During one escape attempt, Le-Huong Do, her husband and their remaining children were among 60 people trying to get to small "taxi-boats" that would take them to a larger boat at sea.

They worried about "moles," government agents pretending to help escapees.

She and her husband were in separate taxi-boats.

Le-Huong Do could not see her husband's boat, but she heard weapons fire and knew he had been captured or killed. She did not hear of him for months.

Boats carrying her and her children were not captured, but they got lost and had to return to Vietnam.

Le-Huong Do later learned through letters written in code that her husband was captured. But he bribed an officer with a ring and disappeared into the countryside—the former chairman of the University of Saigon chemistry department disguised as a peasant.

Rural relatives helped her French-educated husband dig a 3-square-foot hole in the dirt floor of a rice storage room. They covered him with thatch and rice, passing him food twice a day.

He limited his restroom visits to nights.

Last March, the family attempted another escape. Le-Huong Do and three children got out, finding their way to Indonesia. Her husband missed the boat but eventually escaped to Malaysia.

What drove them?

"My husband was a professor who could not teach," she said. "I taught French and English, but they would not let me teach. Because my family had left, they called us CIA agents.

"We had no human rights. My children could not go to school. I was lucky because friends and relatives sent me money. Others really have a hard time there."

Dung Do said that life in Vietnam now resembles George Orwell's descriptions of 1984.

"Parents have to hide informal discussions from their children," he said.

Family members explained the love of their homeland and the sacrifice they made in leaving it.

"We didn't flee the country," said Le-Huong Do. "We fled communism."

Dung Do said that family members and their ancestors lived through 10 centuries of war in Vietnam, through foreign occupation and hunger.

"We never fled until 1975," he said.

"To leave your country is very big punishment," said Mao Do, the ex-general. "Leaving Vietnam and my ancestors."

But he called the United States "paradise."

"Here if I don't like Reagan, I can insult him. In Vietnam even the lowest level of criticism means jail."

Dung Do said that in their various escape attempts, on high seas in furious storms, family members "lost everything."

"But we won our freedom," said Le-Huong Do.