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Save our souls

One ship, 2,600 refugees and a fraught journey from Vietnam to an unwelcoming Hong Kong

SCMP

Destination unknown

The communist takeover of Saigon led to thousands of Chinese-Vietnamese fleeing their country. The first of a two-part story recounts the journey of some of the 2,600 people who found passage on the freighter Skyluck to Hong Kong – where it would meet an infamous end – as part of a flood of 'boatpeople' that overwhelmed the city in 1979.

BY GARY JONES

"On office at 07.45 and then at 09.30 it all started: Skyluck cut her anchor chain and drifting. The proverbial hit the fan and we were off."

June 29, 1979, turned out to be a "day of high drama" for Talbot Bashall, who had recently been appointed controller of the Hong Kong government's Refugee Control Centre, and he recorded its chaos in his diary.

Bashall's unenviable task was to oversee the arrival, processing and care of tens of thousands of desperate Vietnamese who, having taken to the high seas, were fleeing their country to seek refuge in the British colony on the southern coast of China. The Skyluck was a 3,500-tonne Panamanian-registered freighter. Its cargo on this day was 2,600 men, women and children, a small cross section of the mass migration of refugees from Indochina that the global media had dubbed "the boatpeople".

The Skyluck had stolen into Hong Kong on February 7, more than 20 weeks earlier. Authorities in the territory had refused to let the refugees land, however, keeping them prisoner on the overcrowded ship.

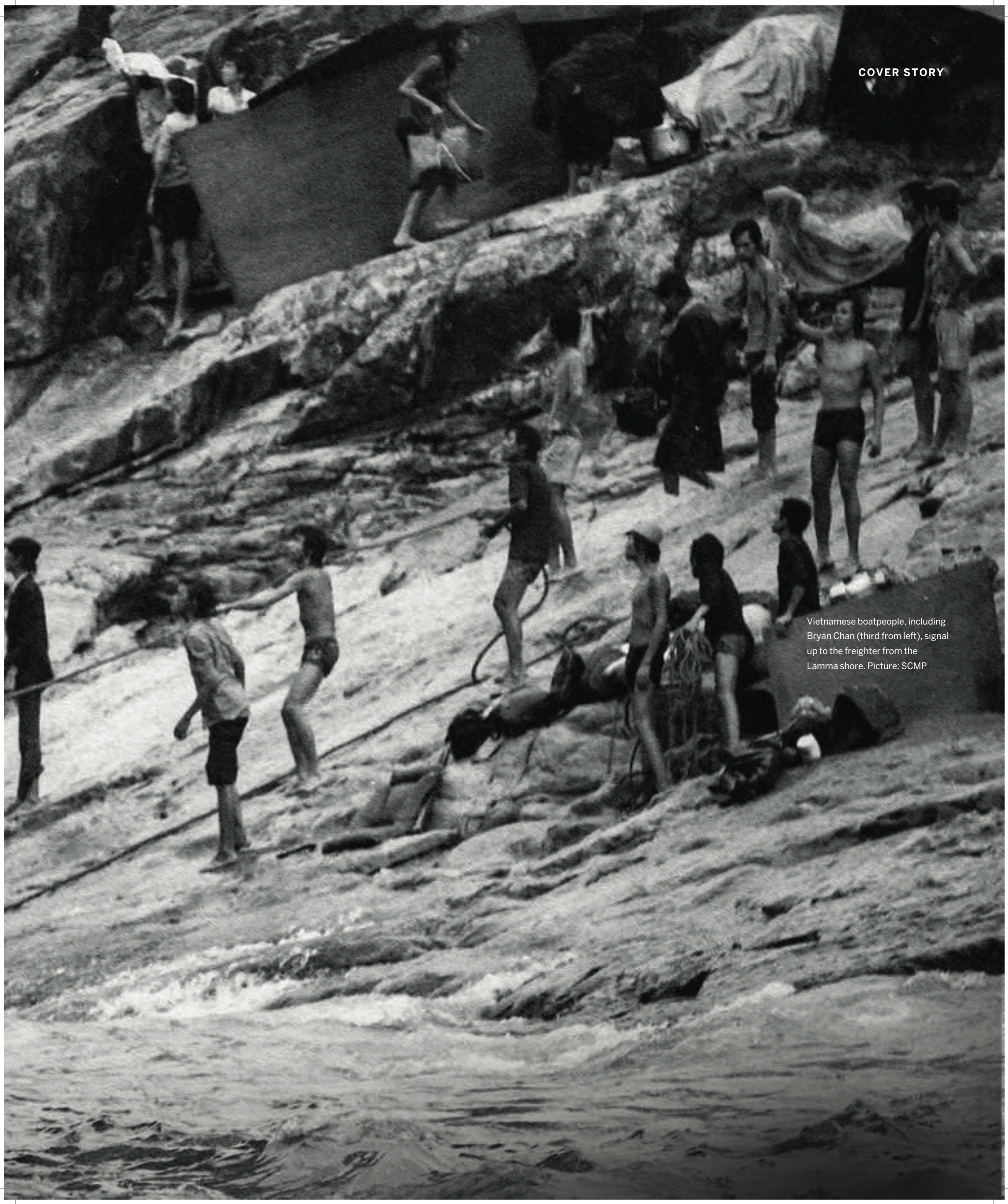
With the Skyluck's engines immobilised (Hong Kong Marine Police having removed the ship's fuel pumps), the 105-metre vessel and its increasingly frustrated passengers had been anchored in the West Lamma Channel, between the islands of Lamma and Cheung Chau, for months. Finally, believing they had been abandoned by Hong Kong and the international community, and in a do-or-die move arising from utter despair, the refugees had severed the Skyluck's anchor chain – as a storm approached – and now, under a bruised sky, buffeted by strong winds, and pushed and pulled by fierce currents, the colossal ship was loose and out of control.

Police launches and salvage tugs were rushed to the scene, scrambling to get lines to the stricken vessel, but their crews were pelted from the Skyluck with bottles, cans and flaming Molotov cocktails. At the top of the ship's gangplank, one refugee waved an axe to keep the police at bay.

Less than two hours later, the Skyluck's portside flank smashed into rocks at the north-western tip of Lamma, where, at the mercy of heavy swells and grinding on bare granite, it began taking in water. While the younger and fitter refugees shimmied down rope ladders and cargo nets to run for the hills, many of the elderly and very young waited on board, or huddled by the water's edge, tired, forlorn and wretched in the rain.

The Skyluck's journey had come to an end. Those of its passengers had just begun.

Four decades later and I am in San Jose, a Silicon Valley city on the southern edge of San Francisco Bay, in northern California. San Jose has a population of one million, with 10 per cent and 7 per cent, respectively, claiming Vietnamese or Chinese heritage. (San Jose, in fact, is believed to have the largest Vietnamese population of any city outside Vietnam.)



Vietnamese boatpeople, including Bryan Chan (third from left), signal up to the freighter from the Lamma shore. Picture: SCMP

Signs at the bus station are in English, Spanish and Vietnamese. My Mercedes-piloting Uber driver is Vietnamese. He drops me at a shiny shopping-and-dining complex called Vietnam Town, where I have a lunch appointment at a Chinese seafood restaurant that, with its circular tables, bright lighting and cacophony of voices, could be in Sheung Wan or Shenzhen.

A convoy of cars (including more Mercedes) makes circuits of the car park. Flags waved from windows are either the Stars and Stripes of the United States or yellow with three horizontal red stripes – the standard of the erstwhile South Vietnam. Protesting modern Vietnam's larger and increasingly assertive neighbour's claim to the Spratly Islands, in the South China Sea, banners and placards read, "China Get Out of Vietnam Waters Now!"

Five members of a Chinese-Vietnamese family have invited me to join them in a private room at the restaurant, to recall their epic voyage to Hong Kong, and how that journey was the springboard to new lives in America's Golden State. Andy Tran, brother Bryan Chan and sister JoAnn Pham, and their cousins Bill Quach and Richard Quach were all aboard the Skyluck when it slammed into Lamma Island, along with 12 other members of their extended clan. Andy and Bill live in San Jose, with the others scattered across the Bay Area.

"Everyone had grown so tired, they would take any risk," Andy Tran, now aged 60 (and 20 when he fled his homeland in 1979), says of the day he finally set foot on Hong Kong soil. "Once the chain was cut, the Skyluck started drifting. At first, the Hong Kong police didn't know what was going on. They shouted, 'Don't panic, we will throw you a rope and pull you back out.' Then everyone went, 'Ha ha ha, not a chance.' When they threw the rope up, we threw it back."

Taking risks was by now second nature to those aboard the Skyluck. Many had sacrificed everything – settled lives, houses and possessions, family members they might never see again – in their all-or-nothing quest to escape their homeland and find new homes.

On April 30, 1975, with the fall of Saigon, the capital city of South Vietnam, to the communist North, the long Vietnam war came to an end. The following year, Saigon would be renamed Ho Chi Minh City, in honour of the North's late revolutionary leader.

With the country soon to be officially unified under the Communist Party of Vietnam, the bloody revenge against the people of the South (that many had anticipated) did not materialise. Once the dust of conflict had settled, however, as many as 300,000 people, especially those associated with the southern government and military, were sent to re-education camps to be "reformed" through hard labour and political indoctrination.

A further million, mostly city dwellers, were dispatched to "new economic zones", essentially primitive agricultural communes where, if they were to survive, they would have to clear malaria-infested jungle and try to grow crops. In 1976, French journalist Jean Lacouture described one zone he visited as "a place one comes to only if the alternative to it would be death".

Such treatment, as well as growing economic hardship and food shortages, saw the persecuted taking to the high seas – often in clapped-out fishing junks entirely unsuited for long-distance journeys – hoping to find sanctuary in Southeast Asian countries such as Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines and Indonesia. Many would not survive the passage, succumbing to storms and shipwreck, murderous pirate attacks, boat breakdowns and starvation.

The numbers of boatpeople were initially small. By the end of 1975, some 3,900 had arrived in Hong Kong, to be accommodated in hastily prepared camps. The government observed a "first asylum" policy whereby the colony provided shelter to refugees if Hong Kong was their first port of call, and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) sent representatives to the city to assist. With the volume of arrivals being low, refugees were quickly resettled overseas, most notably to the US.

By 1978, however, the trickle had become a flood (at its height, in 1979, more than the total number of refugees that arrived in Hong Kong in 1975 landed in the city in a single day). This was largely due to the forced socialist remoulding of industry and harassment of Vietnam's ethnically Chinese population, who had historically dominated commerce, especially in the South. In March 1978, "all trade and business operations of bourgeois tradesmen" were abolished in Vietnam, and tens of thousands of private enterprises were shut down.

Completing the perfect storm, tensions were rising on the Vietnam-China border throughout 1978 (resulting in China's invasion the following year), the Vietnamese government increasingly viewing the country's ethnic Chinese as potential fifth columnists and a threat to national security.

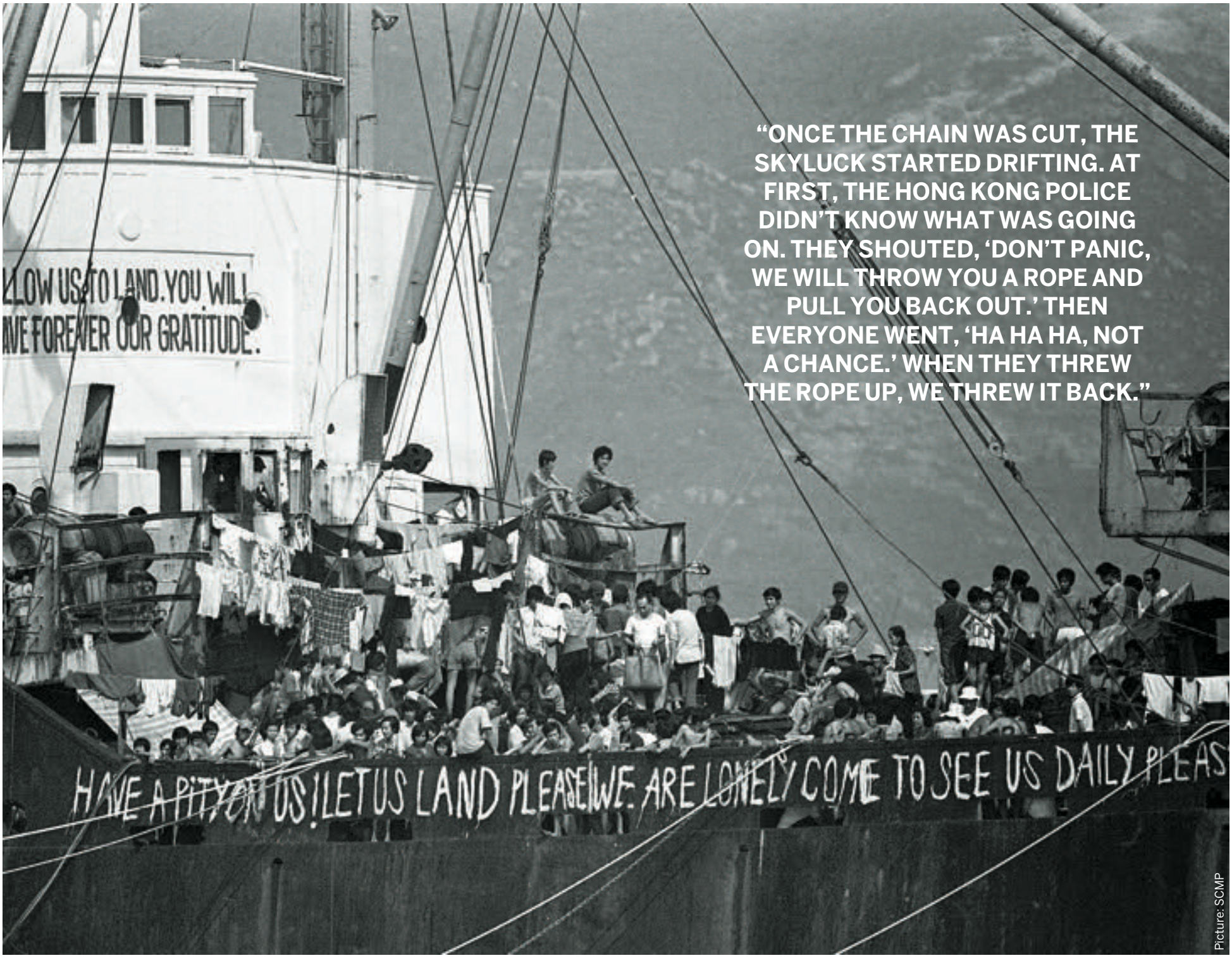
Fifth-generation members of an ethnically Chinese family in Vietnam, my San Jose dining companions had lived in a Chinese neighbourhood in Saigon. Andy Tran describes the family as being upper-middle-class at the time. They spoke Cantonese, and sometimes Fujianese, with family, friends and neighbours, and Vietnamese at school, where they also learned Mandarin. "My family sold materials – copper, steel, iron bars – to the construction industry. [Cousin] Bill's father was working in coffee distribution and retail."

Their businesses, however, were forced to close.

The family group's escape from Vietnam began in mid January of 1979, when they trekked to the languid riverside town of Ben

Above right: the Skyluck in Hong Kong on April 16, 1979. **Left to right:** communist troops make their way to the centre of Saigon having taken control of the city, on April 30, 1975; refugees pack the deck of the Skyluck, anchored off Lamma Island in February 1979; the Skyluck three days after it was intercepted by the Hong Kong Marine Police.

Picture: AFP



"ONCE THE CHAIN WAS CUT, THE SKYLUCK STARTED DRIFTING. AT FIRST, THE HONG KONG POLICE DIDN'T KNOW WHAT WAS GOING ON. THEY SHOUTED, 'DON'T PANIC, WE WILL THROW YOU A ROPE AND PULL YOU BACK OUT.' THEN EVERYONE WENT, 'HA HA HA, NOT A CHANCE.' WHEN THEY THREW THE ROPE UP, WE THREW IT BACK."

Picture: SCMP

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The Skyluck after it ran aground at Shek Kok Tsui, on Lamma Island, on June 29, 1979. Picture: courtesy of Quan Tran

Tre, in the Mekong Delta area of southern Vietnam, about 80km southeast of Ho Chi Minh City. In the delta, the mighty Mekong river, having meandered 4,300km from the Tibetan Plateau, empties into the South China Sea.

In the years immediately after 1975, authorities would try to stop all Vietnamese fleeing the country by boat. By late 1978, however, regime officials were accepting under-the-counter payments to look the other way, and the cash-strapped government not only encouraged the migration – wanting the Chinese-Vietnamese gone – but also saw the opportunity for profit.

When the North's tanks had rolled into Saigon in 1975, many Chinese-Vietnamese had hidden their wealth, often in the form of 24k gold bars. Now, Vietnamese authorities (notably the Cong An, the Public Security Bureau, effectively the police), in collusion with shady international syndicates, racketeers and unscrupulous foreign ship crews, would facilitate their evacuation.

"The communists figured out, 'If we let them go, they'll pay us and we can take their houses. What a deal!'" says Andy Tran. "The benefit of paying the government was that you would not be caught and sent back. They would let you go." And the downside? "You'd have to give them everything you left behind."

Despite denials by Vietnamese officials, all evidence pointed to state-sanctioned people smuggling on a monumental scale.

According to accounts of refugees who spoke to *Post Magazine* for this story (individuals named here as well as others who chose to remain anonymous), an adult would be charged, on average, 10 to 12 taels of 24k gold for space on an escape ship (one tael being 1.2 troy ounces); the fee for children was lower and dependent on age. The price of gold in January 1979 hovered at about US$240 an ounce, so an adult would have been paying around US$3,000, the equivalent today of more than US$10,000.

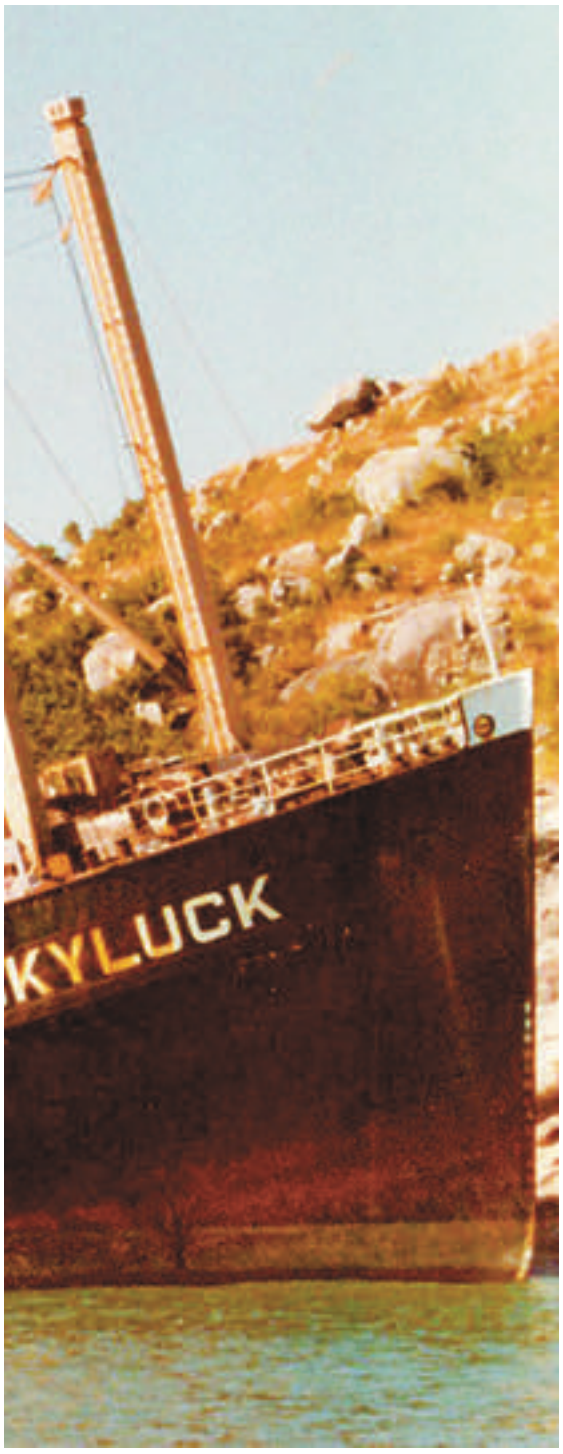
After a few days of waiting nervously in Ben Tre, the group of 17 was summoned on a date believed to have been January 19, 1979, and boarded a wooden fishing boat taking refugees out to sea.

"We didn't take much; a little emergency food like instant noodles, because we thought out there we would have nothing, and cans would be too heavy, so easiest would be some crackers and dried food like noodles," Andy Tran says. "We thought we might not have hot water, but at least you can chew on them. Possessions? Only what we could hand-carry."

Each person in the group also carried what Tran describes as "self-survival necessities" for emergencies. "My grandmother gave everyone a small gold ring to wear, pure gold, so if we became separated, each of us would have something we could sell. We also carried some US dollars, though not a lot."

The group did not know where they were heading, only that they were leaving. "We'd just been told we would get out," says Andy Tran. "The journey was not to anywhere, but to somewhere. Once out, we'd be on our own."

Having headed out to sea, within hours their small craft was swallowed up by the shadow of an immense ship called the Kylu, its name daubed in large, white letters on



the bow and stern of a rust-streaked hull, its deck dominated by a tangle of cargo cranes. Loading took days, says Tran.

Finally, on Wednesday, January 24, 1979, the Kylu – now crammed with some 3,200 refugees – set sail into the unknown.

Exactly one week after our lunch in San Jose, it is a blue-sky winter's day in Washington DC, on the opposite side of the US. Descending into a funky basement coffee shop (its website describes "a Cultural Salon; an Intellectual Sanctuary"), I find myself taking the stairs immediately behind Quan Tran and his son, Thuan "Tom" Tran, the very people I have arranged to meet.

The coffee shop is in the Adams Morgan area of the US capital, a diverse neighbourhood celebrated for its lively nightlife and dining scene. While 42-year-old Tom (close buzz cut; jeans; purple hoodie) lives nearby, Tran senior, who is now 71, resides in the town of Silver Spring, in Maryland, the state immediately to the north. His olive-green knitted hat matches his quilted North Face jacket, he smiles readily and his short but thick dark hair is only slightly flecked with grey, belying his years.

Quan Tran carries the manuscript of a book he has written, in Vietnamese, "for my family". It is about their epic voyage to Hong Kong and titled *Thiên Van*, a literal translation of "Sky Luck", though Tom later explains that more accurate English rendering of the Vietnamese might be "divine destiny" or "heavenly fate".

In Vietnam, Quan Tran's family lived between central Saigon and Cholon, the latter originally being a community, located about 10km west of Saigon proper, established by Chinese immigrants in the 18th century. Cholon was recognised as a city in its own right in the 19th century, and has long since been absorbed into the urban sprawl that is Ho Chi Minh City.

Quan Tran's parents ran a restaurant; he had been an instructor at Saigon's mechanical engineering school before being drafted into the South Vietnamese army for two years of the war, serving as a lieutenant. With the South's collapse, he was sent to a re-education camp, but laboured there, he says, for less than five months because his teaching skills were needed.

Once back at the engineering school, however, Quan Tran could see just how much life had changed for the people of the South. "We were the defeated side," he says. "I knew at that time that my children would have no future; they would never get to high school. So I thought we had better get out of the country, to find a better life for my children."

Like Andy Tran in San Jose, Quan Tran left Vietnam in a large group, this time of 15. They included his wife (who, like Tran himself, was 30 at the time) and their two children (daughter Thao, then aged four, and Tom, only days away from his second birthday), as well as three sisters, one brother, three cousins and four more-distant relatives.

Also like the Californians, their departure point would be Ben Tre, where Quan Tran was introduced to the owner of the fishing boat that would be his family's means of escape. The man needed a mechanic and by taking the role, Quan Tran would not need to pay to get out, handing over only six ounces of gold for his wife and three ounces for each of his children. "My sisters and cousins paid 12 ounces of gold each," he says.

As the day to leave drew closer, those waiting in Ben Tre learned of how large ships, which would be significantly safer on the seas than rotting, overloaded fishing boats, had been used by other escapees.

Top: Mai Tran, in 1980, soon after his arrival in the US. **Below:** Mai Tran today.

"THERE WERE ABOUT SIX OTHER KIDS WITHOUT PARENTS AND WE WOULD SLEEP BETWEEN THE PAPER ROLLS. NOBODY ELSE WANTED TO BE IN THERE – IT WAS DARK. THEY CALLED US 'THE PAPER KIDS'."

Most notable would have been the 4,000-tonne freighter Huey Fong, which had left the Mekong Delta on December 18, 1978, carrying some 3,300 refugees.

The Huey Fong's intended first port of call was Kaohsiung, in Taiwan, and so it was initially refused entry to Hong Kong. The ship had been intercepted by Marine Police off the Po Toi islands (5km southeast of Hong Kong Island), but was finally received on January 19, 1979, news that was reported on radio stations such as the BBC World Service and Voice of America.

"We asked the police if we could go in a similar way to the Huey Fong and the police said maybe," says Quan Tran. "They didn't promise, but then they said they had a big ship for us. They said there was one condition: if they transferred us to the ship, we would have to give them our boat, so that they could sell it." The fishing boat owner and members of his family would also join the Kylu. "That was the agreement between us and the police."

Quan Tran says his fishing boat, carrying what he estimates to have been 120 to 150 people, was one of the first to reach the Kylu. "We were waiting, waiting, and they keep loading people on, back and forth, back and forth. I think it took three or four days before the captain said OK, enough, and took us away."

Fifteen-year-old Mai Tran and sister Thu-Hong, aged 14, were also aboard the Kylu when it set sail.

The siblings' father had been a South Vietnamese diplomat, stationed in the late 1960s and early 70s at the embassy in Bangkok – the family living in the Thai capital – before returning to Vietnam in 1972, to work in government in Saigon. With the end of the war, Mai Tran's father and uncles were sent to re-education camps; Tran's mother eventually bribed an official to have her husband released.

The couple had six children – four girls and two boys – and, says Mai Tran, they tried to escape from Vietnam as a family five times from 1976, but were caught, his elder sisters being punished with spells in prison. By 1979, a decision had been made: the family would split up for future attempts. Mai Tran and Thu-Hong would go first.

Having learned of how Chinese-Vietnamese were being permitted to escape from the country, Mai Tran's parents took the two children to the Mekong Delta.

"From Saigon, we went to my mother's hometown, Ben Tre, where we were met by the local official. They put us into police housing while we waited," Mai Tran, 55, says by telephone from his home in Fort Collins, in the US state of Colorado. "From there, they took us to Binh Dai, which is the town near the ocean, where we got on the boat. We waited there a week."

Mai Tran's parents paid 15 ounces for each child, and gave him a 24k gold

wedding band that could be sold in an emergency. "We had small bags with just two or three sets of clothes," Mai Tran says, adding that they also had no idea where they would be heading. "We only knew that we were getting out."

Mai Tran says he and his sister left Binh Dai early one morning. "On our boat – a small, wooden fishing boat – there were 200 to 300 people. It took maybe two or three hours before we could see the ship. Getting aboard was really dangerous – we had to climb up these nets that hung down."

Once aboard, the youngsters had to fend for themselves. "We settled in. No cabins, just out in hallways; no beds, just anywhere where you can sit or lay down. For two, three days or more, more people were coming, coming, coming."

Soon the deck was a chaos of makeshift tents and tarpaulin shelters. Below deck, the ship had three main cargo-storage areas, each split into upper and lower holds. The higher levels filled up first – the dank, dingy bowels still containing some cargo in the form of huge rolls of paper. "There was a space between the first and second floors, about a metre-high," says Mai Tran. "There were about six other kids without parents, and that's where we went, and we would sleep between the paper rolls. Nobody else wanted to be in there – it was dark – so we stayed separate from the main population. They called us 'the paper kids'."

Quan Tran, in Washington DC, says the Kylu's captain had told him the ship would steer for Hong Kong, to the northeast, but once on the move, he realised this could not be the case. "Each day, I went up to the control cabin to see where the ship was going. I know that at first they go south, but I don't know where. One day, we saw offshore drilling [possibly for oil or gas], so we thought maybe we were close to Malaysia or Thailand."

The arrangement that Quan Tran and others had made was simply to get out of Vietnam, hopefully to reach a refugee camp, or perhaps to be picked up at sea by a friendly naval vessel, and to be resettled in another country. Where they would land first was not important.

What quickly became the most pressing issue was food. Quan Tran says he initially recalls sandwiches and crackers being provided, but they ran out after just a couple of days. "There were 3,000 people, and they did not have enough food for us, so we had to organise cooking rice soup, but there was nothing in which to cook it. We took an old oil container, a 55-gallon drum, cut it in half, cleaned it with salt water, and cooked in that. That's why we ate rice soup with a diesel smell. The ration was a cup of rice soup for each person, two times a day."

For Andy Tran's sister JoAnn Pham, who was 13 while on the ship, and now aged 53, the rice soup was so unappetising it seared into her child's brain. "The worst thing I remember is the porridge cooked in a barrel. Yeuch! You could taste the metal. It was water and just a little rice, and all these other …" – she scrunches her face in disgust – "bits".

Mai Tran has no recollection of sandwiches, and remembers even more meagre rations. "The food was rice soup, once a day," he says. "There was no fixed time, it just came when it was your turn. That's all we had for five to six days."

The food shortage occurred, the refugees believe, because there were far more people on the ship than had been planned. Though it is true that large numbers of ethnically Chinese were fleeing Vietnam, and big ships and freighters were laid on by people smugglers for those willing to pay to escape, many on board were effectively stowaways, or had been forced aboard, and a large proportion were not Chinese at all.

While the Tran and Quach families, now living in California, are of Chinese ethnicity, only one grandfather of Maryland-based Quan Tran was Chinese, and he considers himself fully Vietnamese. Mai Tran claims no Chinese ancestry at all, which may account for why his parents paid over the odds: 15 ounces of gold for his journey, and 15 for that of his sister.

Years later, after being reunited with his parents, Mai Tran would learn more about the deal they struck to get him out of the country. "According to my mom, they only anticipated 600 to 800 people who paid, but in the end there were 3,000 people. Almost the whole of the village at Binh Dai, they knew what was happening and they used [the ship] as a way to get out as well. Those people were Vietnamese and they got on for free."

"[The authorities] hired a lot of locals to transport us, and some of them saw an opportunity," says Andy Tran. "When they transported us, they also came aboard." The result, he adds, was that many paying customers were stranded in Ben Tre when shuttle boats failed to return from the Kylu. "I happened to run into one who […] didn't get on because his fishing boat never came back to pick him up. His taxi never came."

And, according to Quan Tran, there were Chinese-Vietnamese on board who had not intended to escape at all. "Lots of people in Ben Tre were forced out of their homes in the night because they were Chinese," he says, adding that while they would not have paid a fee, the Cong An would have seized their homes and belongings.

In the closing days of January, the Kylu entered waters of the western Philippines and verdant tropical islands hoved into view. On the evening of January 31, the ship cautiously edged closer to one island and dropped anchor. Soon, refugees were queuing on the freighter's deck, to descend the gangway to water level and be ferried ashore under cover of darkness.

Mai Tran says he saw a chance to assuage their gnawing hunger. "I said to my sister and some other kids, 'Why don't we just stay back and try and find some food first?'" The youngsters went to where the rice soup was prepared each day, and found the barrel in which it was boiled. "We scraped out the burnt rice at the bottom to eat."

Mai Tran was also anxious about leaving the ship's protection in darkness. "We couldn't see anything. I said, 'Let's wait until morning,' so our group, us kids, that's what we agreed to do."

Mai Tran's caution would lead to "the paper kids" being stuck at sea for five more months.

Come the half-light of the approaching day, more than 600 refugees had been offloaded from the Kylu when the operation was hastily abandoned. "It was maybe 5am. My family and I were close to the ladder – I saw the transfer boat that took people from the ship," says Quan Tran. "Then I heard shots and I saw a flare, and the ship's crew said the Philippine navy was firing on us, and we had to get away."

Andy Tran's account is similar. "Around dawn, a fishing boat saw us and maybe reported us to the coastguard, so the Philippine navy come out to see what is going on, and we pulled anchor and sailed out of there."

Meanwhile, in Hong Kong, some 1,400km to the north, 3,274 taels of gold (close to 4,000 troy ounces, then worth almost US$1 million), had been found secreted in a disused oil tank on the Huey Fong, to be confiscated and held at the Treasury. The discovery would have a profound effect on the fate of the refugees chased away from Philippines.

Four decades later, what came next for the Kylu is disputed. Though many survivors of the journey are adamant about events they witnessed – and when those events occurred – their personal recollections (like many news reports from the time), while similar, are inconsistent.

The accounts of Andy Tran and Quan Tran (who, as far as they are aware, have never met) are alike in many respects. Both claim that soon after fleeing the island in the Philippines, which would likely have been on February 1, they rendezvoused at sea with another large freighter. Andy Tran says he witnessed gold being removed from their ship, while Quan Tran suspects this to have been the case.

"The captain said we would meet another ship that would give us food," says Quan Tran, adding that supplies were shuttled over in a lifeboat, and everyone gathered on one side of the ship to watch. "Meanwhile, they took another boat to the other side [of the Kylu], with the stairs. I went to that side and saw some people. They were not like us; they had nice clothing, not like refugees. I don't know if they transferred the gold. They had guns. I saw two people with rifles."

"They parked another ship next to [ours] and transferred the gold over, guarded by sailors with M16s," says Andy Tran. "They said, 'Don't cross this line. This is the open sea, anything can happen here. Cross this line and you'll be shot.' We saw them carry the gold across, and carry food back for us."

Frank Tran, late brother of Andy Tran, Bryan Chan and JoAnn Pham, and who

A 1971 photograph of Cholon, a community to the west of Saigon, established by Chinese immigrants in the 18th century. Picture: Alamy

was 17 at the time, kept a journal documenting the family's escape from Vietnam. Later – while being treated for the cancer that took his life in 2011, at the age of 49 – he created a website about the journey (skyluck1979.com). That website also suggests a meeting of ships soon after the Kylu was chased away from the island in the Philippines.

And another US-based refugee from the ship who spoke to *Post Magazine* recalled heavy bags being taken away on that day, while "men with M16s ensured we stayed at a distance".

Other accounts of the journey, however, suggest they were met at sea by a freighter in the days or the day before the attempted dumping of refugees. For his part, Mai Tran says he recalls meeting two ships, each on a different day. "On the way from Vietnam to the Philippines, there was a ship that stopped, and people said they took the gold," he says. "Then, when we left the Philippines, there was another ship that swung by and dropped off food."

Though the Kylu had a captain – from Taiwan – and crew, the refugees had largely been left to their own devices while at sea, and a loose organisational hierarchy had evolved out of necessity, primarily to oversee food distribution.

While some refugees were accorded positions of responsibility because of Mandarin-language skills that allowed them to liaise with the captain, leadership roles were mostly taken by men, in their 20s or early 30s, who had served with the South Vietnam armed forces. Quan Tran was among them.

The refugee leaders demanded the captain tell them of his next move, and they were told Hong Kong was now their goal. Quan Tran claims, however, that the following day (February 2) the ship was again heading south, and in the wrong direction. With the refugees angered and unwilling to accept more delays, Quan Tran describes what happened next as "a little bit of a takeover".

"When the captain saw that we were a big group, he did not yell at us like he had [earlier in the journey]. He asked what we wanted. We said he had not kept his promise, so we wanted to take over the ship and go to Hong Kong."

Quan Tran says the captain partially agreed to their demands, but argued that the ship must, for appearances' sake, remain under his control lest the refugees

Picture: courtesy of Bryan Chan

become open to accusations of piracy, and they accepted this compromise. "After that, I saw a telegram [to the captain, from his controllers], agreeing that we could go to Hong Kong." The message, Quan Tran alleges, also ordered the captain to have the ship's name repainted.

In short order, crew members added the letters S, C and K to the ship's hull, and the freighter reverted back to its real name. The Kylu, of course, had always been the Skyluck in disguise. And now, loaded with the remaining 2,600 or so refugees, it was steaming towards Hong Kong.

It was not the first time that the long-serving freighter had plied the oceans under another name.

While under construction, by Henry Robb Ltd, a substantial Scottish ship-building concern at Leith Docks, in the Scottish capital of Edinburgh, the vessel was called the Kurutai. Delivered in 1951 to the Union Steam Ship Company, in New Zealand, the vessel was then given the name Waimate.

In 1972, the Waimate was restyled Eastern Planet by its new owner, Manila-based Eastern Shipping Lines, and five years later, in 1977, it was purchased by the Hong Kong-owned Skyluck Steamship Company, and rebranded once more. Soon the name Skyluck would be notorious throughout Hong Kong, the ship commanding front pages of the city's newspapers and prime slots on the evening news.

In the early hours of February 7, 1979, the Skyluck (as reported by the *South China Morning Post* the following day) "ignored signals from Waglan Lighthouse" – on Waglan Island, one of the Po Toi islands – and slipped into Victoria Harbour, anchoring off the southwest of the Kowloon peninsula, not far from Ocean Terminal.

"We had been living all over the ship – in the cargo hold, all over the deck – but as we approached Hong Kong, we were told to throw all the tents from the deck overboard, and hide away in the hold," says Andy Tran. The idea was not to look like "a floating refugee camp", he adds. "We quietly entered Victoria Harbour at night-time, at about 1am or 2am."

"Everyone had been told to get inside, so we just looked like any other commercial ship," says Mai Tran. "As soon as the anchor was down, I remember everybody came up and went to one side to look, and the ship started tipping. We could see all the lights. It was beautiful."

According to the *Post*'s account of the Skyluck's arrival, marine police boarded the ship after reports of disturbances on board, to discover human cargo numbering in the thousands and the captain, "to their surprise, tied up and guarded by several refugees" in the wheelhouse. That, insists Quan Tran, was true but not the full story: the captain, he claims, was tied up only when they had reached their destination, as had been agreed in order to absolve him of responsibility for bringing refugees to Hong Kong.

After initial disagreement from refugee leaders, it was accepted that the Skyluck needed to be moved out of the busy harbour and to a quieter location. This was done at about 2.30pm on the day of the ship's arrival; the Skyluck was escorted to Ha Mei Wan, on the western side of Lamma Island (essentially the part of the West Lamma Channel lying off Hung Shing Yeh and what today is called Power Station Beach [Lamma Power Station only having been built in 1982]).

California-based siblings (seated, from left) Andy Tran, Bryan Chan and JoAnn Pham, and their cousins Richard Quach and Bill Quach (standing, from left), pictured over lunch in San Jose. All were Vietnamese boat people who arrived in Hong Kong in 1979 aboard the Skyluck. Picture: Gary Jones

Information quickly obtained from Singapore revealed that the Skyluck had sailed from the Lion City at about 8am on January 12. As well as its captain, it carried 25 crew (10 from Taiwan, 10 from Indonesia, four from Hong Kong and one from Vietnam), no other passengers, and a partial load of paper, corrugated boxes and plywood. With Hong Kong listed as its first port of call, the journey from Singapore would normally have taken about five days for a ship like the Skyluck.

So where had it been for 27 days?

The captain initially claimed multiple breakdowns at sea, and that his freighter had rescued the refugees from sinking or unseaworthy boats it had encountered between January 18 and 21. His unruly new passengers, he alleged, had seized his logbook and radio log, throwing those records of the journey overboard.

Officers of Hong Kong Marine Department and police were deeply sceptical, however, and an investigation began.

Over the weeks that followed, it was ascertained that, on leaving Singapore, the Skyluck had, in fact, sailed for the southern tip of Vietnam, anchoring off the Mekong Delta. During the journey from Singapore, the letters S, C and K had been removed from the

Picture: courtesy of Bryan Chan

Far left: members of the Tran/Quach family in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, in 1978, including Bryan Chan (third from left). JoAnn Pham (fourth from right), Frank Tran (third from right) and Andy Tran (far right).
Left: (left to right) Bill Quach, his cousin Ahdee Chan, brother John Quach and two neighbours in Ho Chi Minh City, in 1978 or January 1979. "This was the last pic we had before we left Vietnam," says Bill Quach. "We cut classes to go to the zoo."

ship's name, the goal being to create confusion should the vessel attract attention and be reported to authorities during its illicit mission. (Chemists from the Forensic Science Division of the Hong Kong police examined paint samples taken from the ship, confirming the hiding and repainting of those letters.)

The location in the Philippines where the ship offloaded more than 600 refugees was Boayan Island, off the northwest coast of Palawan Island, in Palawan province. The 1,327-hectare island was largely forested and barely inhabited (as it remains, with fewer than 1,000 residents, most involved in the fishing industry).

Sheltered by fisherman until rounded up by the Philippines military, those refugees were transferred to a refugee camp in the city of Puerto Princesa, on Palawan Island, and an Associated Press dispatch released weeks later – in March 1979 – centred on an account smuggled out of that camp.

Allegedly written by Pham Dang Bao, 30-year-old son of late South Vietnam foreign minister Pham Dang Lam (and one of the refugees dropped off in the Philippines), the account stated that gold had been transferred from the Skyluck – "shifted in two sacks" – on January 26, before he left the ship.

The suggestion that a hoard of gold was removed before the Skyluck's arrival in the Philippines is supported in the writings of veteran Australian journalist Bruce Grant, drawing on the accounts of Southeast Asia correspondents from Australian newspaper *The Age* and published in late 1979 as a book (long since out of print) called *The Boat People*. In his account, Grant posited that the Skyluck had left Singapore at much the same time as a Taiwan-owned vessel called the United Faith.

"A few days [after leaving Vietnam] she met the United Faith near Indonesia's Natuna Islands in the South China Sea," Grant wrote. "The gold was transferred to the United Faith, which was there ostensibly to supply the refugee carrier with food and water. The Skyluck, rechristened the Kylu by the simple trick of painting out the first and last two letters of its name, then sailed northeast towards Palawan.

"The United Faith then made a beeline for Hong Kong where she was met, in international waters, by a fishing boat which offloaded the gold and ferried it undetected into the British territory. 'A few days later, we saw Vietnamese gold popping up in the local market, but no refugees,' a Hong Kong official said."

Indonesia's Natuna archipelago consists of 272 islands in the south of the South China Sea, off the northwest coast of Borneo, which would tie in with Quan Tran's assertion that the ship headed south from the Mekong Delta, and that he saw offshore drilling rigs (the area has substantial natural gas reserves, discovered in the early 1970s).

In 1985, however, a Skyluck survivor – by then resettled in New Zealand – told the *Post* that the gold had been transferred to a "pure white" ship they met off the Philippines one day before the attempt to offload refugees.

Andy Tran argues that, if the attempt to offload all of the refugees in the Philippines had been a success, there would have been no need to remove illicit valuables from the ship, which again suggests that its booty would have been removed later rather than earlier. "If they had been successful in dropping us off on some island, and we reported to local government how we had been picked up by a ship called Kylu, then they would search for Kylu," he says. "No one would ever have known that the Skyluck had been involved, and they would have gone to Hong Kong as the Skyluck."

With that strategy thwarted, Andy Tran believes, Hong Kong became the people smugglers' plan B, but there was a problem. "They knew they could not carry the gold with them because it would also be confiscated, so they had another ship park next to it, and offloaded the gold."

And on February 22, 1979, the *South China Morning Post* reported that cryptic ship-to-shore communications, sent as the freighter approached the city, had been traced back by police. One such message – "Pick up auntie" – was believed to have been a request to have something removed from the Skyluck.

Whatever the truth of whether and when the ship had carried a small fortune in 24k gold bars, it was now gone. But with the Skyluck's arrival in Hong Kong – coming so soon after the refugee and riches-laden Huey Fong – the growing fear was that highly organised people smuggling was under way, and of a magnitude that the tiny territory would not be able to handle.

With more massive ships crammed with refugees reported to be just over the horizon, the nervous city braced itself for an oceanic exodus from Vietnam, and a humanitarian crisis that would stretch Hong Kong's security forces – as well as its people's capacity for compassion – to their limits. ■

Next week: with Hong Kong refusing to allow the Skyluck to land, the British colony keeps 2,600 men, women and children prisoner off Lamma. As weeks turn into months, life on board the overcrowded freighter becomes increasingly unbearable, leading to rising tension, refugees throwing themselves overboard, a hunger strike and a daring, high-risk break for freedom.

From left: Quan Tran (blue shirt) and friends from the Skyluck, in the Chi Ma Wan refugee detention centre on Lantau island in 1979. Picture: courtesy of Quan Tran; Quan Tran and his son, Thuan "Tom" Tran, in Washington DC. Picture: Gary Jones

HARD SHIP

The 3,500-tonne freighter Skyluck arrived in Hong Kong in February 1979 with a cargo of 2,600 Vietnamese 'boatpeople'. The second of a two-part story recounts the daily lives of the refugees and the final desperate act that brought their nearly five-month imprisonment aboard to an end.

BY **GARY JONES**

Main picture: refugees being held on the Skyluck attempt to swim to shore on March 11, 1979. **From far left:** the ship run aground on Lamma Island; Skyluck refugees captured after jumping ship; Marine Police pick up refugees who were attempting to swim to shore. Pictures: SCMP

With the fall of Saigon, capital city of South Vietnam, on April 30, 1975, the Vietnam war came to an end and the Southeast Asian country was unified under the Communist Party of Vietnam. Subsequent economic hardship and the threat of forced labour in re-education camps resulted in increasing numbers fleeing the country, risking shipwreck, drowning, starvation and pirate attacks by taking to the South China Sea in overcrowded fishing boats.

By 1978, the initial trickle of "boatpeople" had become a flood, largely due to the Vietnamese regime's persecution of its ethnic-Chinese population, and desire to profit from their wealth by charging the equivalent of US$10,000 today in gold for passage out of the country.

Colluding with international syndicates, Vietnamese authorities were now complicit in people smuggling on a massive scale, with colossal freighters sometimes employed to make the exodus as economically efficient as possible.

One such ship was a rusting, 3,500-tonne vessel called the Skyluck, which set sail from the Mekong Delta in January 1979 crammed with thousands of refugees. After an attempt to offload its human cargo in the Philippines had been thwarted, the angry passengers demanded that the captain take them to Hong Kong. The Skyluck slipped quietly into Victoria Harbour in the early hours of February 7, 1979.

The first instalment of the Skyluck story can be found at scmp.com/magazines/post-magazine.

By the time the Skyluck had arrived in Hong Kong, its cargo of more than 2,600 refugees had been at sea for two weeks, surviving on little more than watery rice soup and hope. Getting food and medical care to them was a priority, and doctors from the Auxiliary Medical Services were dispatched to what the *South China Morning Post* described as the "battered and shabby" ship now moored in the West Lamma Channel, between Lamma and Cheung Chau islands.

Soon, the refugees on board had decorated the 105-metre-long Skyluck with signs, banners and painted messages proclaiming, "Life is precious, but freedom is more valuable"; "SOS. Please help us refugees from Vietnam. Thanks a lot"; "We are extremely hungry, but we need freedom more"; and "Food and Medicine save refugee lives".

A pontoon was lashed to the ship to facilitate food delivery. Supplies were mostly canned and included sardines, pork luncheon meat, baked beans and condensed milk, as well as oranges, dry crackers and sliced bread. By the end of the day after the Skyluck's arrival, some 2.4 tonnes of provisions had been reported as delivered (by February 12, total supplies would top 13 tonnes, and be estimated to be costing Hong Kong HK$5 per refugee per day).

After that initial burst of activity, provisions were delivered to the pontoon every two days, to be distributed by the refugees themselves. Skyluck passenger Mai Tran, now aged 55, speaking from his home in Fort Collins, Colorado, in the United States, remembers, "Four people share a can of beans, four people share a can of ham, four share a can of condensed milk, two people share an orange, two or three pieces of bread per person, some crackers ..."

The Skyluck passengers expected to be held on the ship for some days: it was standard procedure for boatpeople arriving in Hong Kong to be kept at anchorage for a week, effectively quarantined at sea. Due to the ship having entered the harbour illegally and covertly, thereby embarrassing those charged with keeping track of such arrivals, the refugees were informed, on February 9, 1979, that they would not be allowed to land any time soon.

While essentials would continue to be delivered, and the refugees' medical needs met, the Skyluck would be guarded around the clock by at least one police launch. And so began a stand-off that would last for the best part of five months – until, in late June, the frustrated refugees, their tempers fraying and patience stretched, would take matters into their own hands in the most swashbuckling fashion.

"It was a terrible life," Quan Tran, a 71-year-old survivor of the Skyluck's journey who eventually resettled in Maryland, in the US, says of their months held in maritime purgatory, adding that he, his wife and their four-year-old daughter and two-year-old son would be squeezed into an area "like a king bed; it was so small".

An instructor at Saigon's mechanical engineering school before being drafted into in the South Vietnamese army for two years of the Vietnam war, serving as a lieutenant, Quan Tran had chosen to escape the country of his birth to provide a better future for his family.

"We were like a big sardine can, with each one of us a sardine," he says, of life on board the Skyluck.

One highlight in each day was what Mai Tran – who was 16 while on the Skyluck and travelling with his 14-year-old sister – describes as "a kind of flea market" that sprang up on deck, testament to the Vietnamese and Chinese instincts for commercial enterprise, both of which had been repressed under the totalitarian regime at home.

"After we landed in Hong Kong, the food supply was pretty good. Bread, canned beans, milk, but some families would not need milk, while kids would need more milk, so we started exchanging food," recalls Andy Tran, now aged 60 (and 20 when he fled his homeland in 1979). Andy Tran resettled in San Jose, in California's Silicon Valley, with siblings and cousins also making new lives in the San Francisco Bay Area.

"'Hey, I'll give you my bread, how about you give me your milk.' A system or pricing was established – for one can of milk, pay maybe half a loaf of bread – because currency doesn't mean anything on the ship."

"It was quite good compared to what we had been used to," Quan Tran says of the food provided, "but eat one thing over again and

Quan Tran (far right), his son Thuan "Tom" Tran (aged two) and friends from the Skyluck, in the Chi Ma Wan detention centre on Lantau Island in 1979. Picture: courtesy of Quan Tran.

you get sick of it. For many years after, I could not eat beans or luncheon meat or sardines.

"After a while we asked for freshly prepared food, and then they would bring it three times a week," adds Quan Tran, who, having been in the South Vietnam military, soon found himself among the de facto leadership on the Skyluck. "Older people, we were OK, but the young people, especially if alone, they did not know how to save food. When they got it, they would eat it in one day, and the next day they would be hungry."

Asked today what she remembers most about the months marooned off Lamma Island, Andy Tran's sister JoAnn Pham, who was 13 while on the ship, and now aged 53, laughs and says, "Hungry, hungry, hungry, hungry, hungry."

From February 19, cooked rice and some hot food were provided. Later, in April, it would be increased to two hot meals a day.

While the Skyluck was guarded to ensure refugees did not abscond, the police presence also kept journalists and the simply curious away from the ship. This lack of communication with the outside world led to a belief among refugees that they were being deliberately pushed from the headlines.

Indeed, updates from the Skyluck all but disappeared from the *Post* after February 20, with stories focusing instead on the daily arrival of other refugee boats, and the slow-moving investigation into the ship's journey to Hong Kong, with its Taiwanese captain and pan-Asian crew facing charges for people smuggling.

All that changed on March 11, more than a month after the Skyluck's arrival, when new signs began to appear on the ship. Messages read, "We plead for freedom not isolation"; "Don't let us be forgotten. Let us land!"; "Run for life. Run for freedom"; "Have pity on us. Let us land please!"; and, "Help us land as soon as possible".

At about 10am, 100 or so young male refugees began leaping overboard to swim the 1,500 or so metres to shore, some using tin containers – in which foodstuffs had been delivered – as floats. Half of the swimmers were picked up by police launches, but about 50 reached Lamma's Hung Shing Yeh Beach, most to be quickly rounded up and taken to the nearby police post, where two were treated for exhaustion. Through the post's chain-link fence, others handed pre-prepared written pleas to land to journalists.

One 15-year-old swimmer was at liberty for 12 hours, smuggled off Lamma on a public ferry by a group of European picnickers, taken to a Mong Kok hotel where he was reunited with his 17-year-old sister, who had possibly arrived on an earlier refugee boat, and was even interviewed on local television before turning himself in.

Mai Tran was one of the volunteer swimmers, but quickly realised he was out of his depth, in more ways than one. "It was so cold that I turned back," he says.

"We just wanted the public to know we were there and not be forgotten. We know we cannot escape. How can we escape?" says Quan Tran. "We'd been there, isolated, for more than a month. We wanted our families to know where we were, and that we were safe. We cannot do this while stuck on the ship, so we decided to try and get inland, to tell people, to tell the press, that we were there. If people in Vietnam listened to [radio stations like] the BBC or VOA [Voice of America], they would know that we had got to Hong Kong."

When the city's representative of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Angelo Rasanayagam, sent a letter to the *Post*, decrying the lack of press coverage of the Skyluck refugees' plight, veteran Vietnam war photographer and Hong Kong-based journalist Derek Maitland used the newspaper's pages to slam what he called a "total information blackout on refugees" by the government that had "denied the public any personal contact with these people and effectively reduced them to dehumanised newspaper statistics".

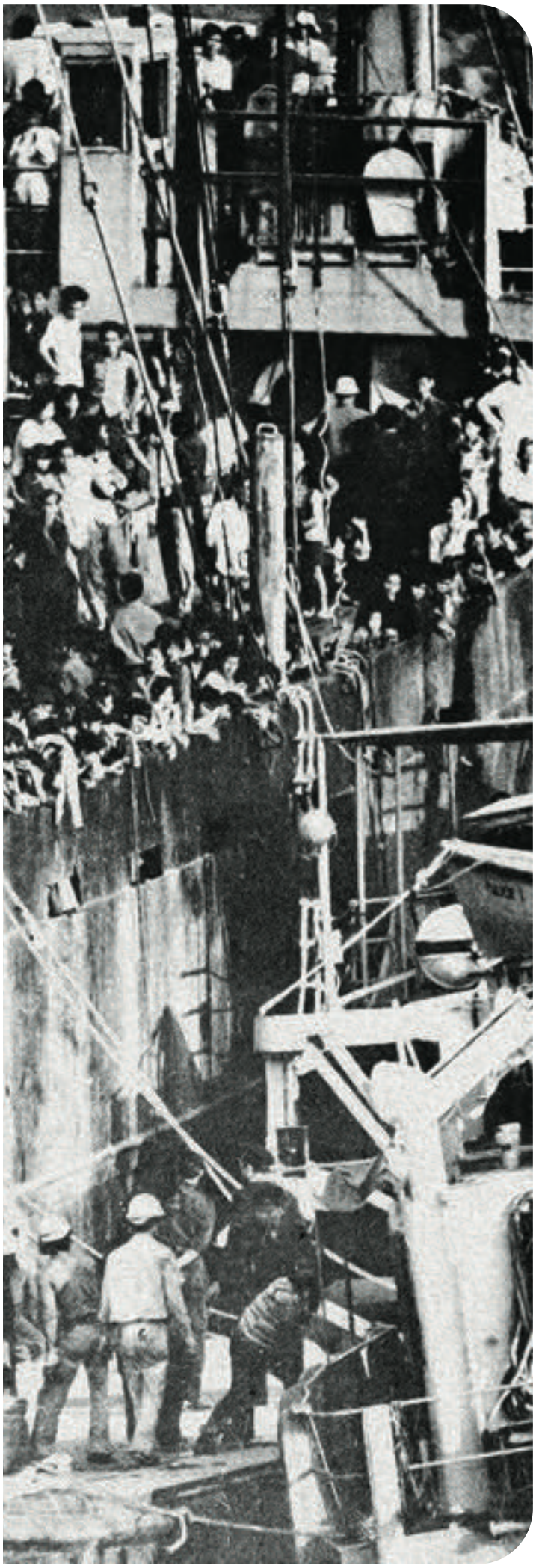
After the swimming action, the Skyluck was towed further from Lamma ("We thought they were going to pull us in, but they pulled us out," recalls Andy Tran) and a police launch was moored to the pontoon alongside the ship. An air of despondency settled over the refugees, who struggled to fill their days.

Music lover Andy Tran had books of music theory among the few possessions he had brought from home, which he studied. "I like to read but there wasn't much reading material," he says. "There was a reverend [on the ship], and so I also read the Bible three or four times, to kill the days. Some of us would gather on the deck, just sit around and talk, watch the sunrise or sunset."

His sister JoAnn Pham remembers she would "read the labels on cans, over and over and over again". Their cousin Bill Quach, who was just nine years old then, and 49 today, says the months "felt like years".

Mai Tran struggled with a feeling of helplessness. "Just the waiting, not knowing what was going to happen, seeing no light at the end of the tunnel," he says. "We had no contact with our family, for about six months. Hunger we could manage, and we would exercise by jumping in the ocean and swimming against the current. We had friends so we could socialise, but not knowing about our family, not knowing our future, those were the hardest things."

When the Skyluck had arrived in Hong Kong in February 1979, doctors who went aboard found that just three people were



Left: refugees fill the deck of the Skyluck as supplies are delivered, in February 1979. **Above:** the Ha Lung refugee boat is anchored off Lamma within sight of the Skyluck. **Below:** refugees crammed aboard the 35-metre Ha Lung when it arrives in Hong Kong, in April 1979.

suffering from only minor ailments: two men and a four-year-old boy, who were taken to hospital to be treated, and then returned to the ship. In the months that followed, there were cases of pneumonia, internal bleeding, skin conditions, tuberculosis, sciatica, diarrhoea, haemorrhoids, measles and mumps, and even a suspected instance of leprosy.

With two young children to watch over, Quan Tran was tormented by the thought that disease could spread quickly on the ship. "We were lucky that it didn't happen but I was very scared about that," he says, adding that there were a number of doctors among the refugees. They would cater to everyday complaints, with medications provided by Hong Kong authorities.

"People who got badly sick, or who were pregnant or needed some special care, would be transferred to hospital," says Quan Tran. "They were lucky because they get lots of food, lots of meat. Some people wanted to get sick."

While the ship's deck was usually thronged with young men, the elderly, women and children tended to stay inside the holds, where – with so many unwashed bodies in close quarters – the air was stale and nauseating, permeated with the stench of diesel, grease, rust, sweat and worse.

Maintaining hygiene was a struggle, Quan Tran remembers, especially as the months dragged on, and the mercury soared. "We had only two litres of water for each person a day, so could not have a proper wash. We had to save it to have a proper shower," he says. "There were 2,600 people there, and we had 2,600 heads with lice. I think there were three people who did not have lice, because my friend shaved his head and shaved his daughters' heads."

On April 16, 1979, 52-year-old Talbot Bashall was appointed controller of the Hong Kong government's Refugee Control Centre, headquartered at Victoria Barracks, then in Admiralty (and roughly where Hong Kong Park and the Pacific Place shopping centre sit today). The Skyluck had by now been isolated off Lamma for the best part of 10 weeks.

Born in the English county of Surrey, Bashall had served with the British Army in Italy and Palestine in the years that followed the second world war. He arrived in Hong Kong in 1953, carving out a career in correctional services. Starting out as an officer in Stanley Prison, he later ran a prison-staff training school and an institution for young offenders. None of this, however, had prepared him for the life-changing challenge that lie ahead.

"People tend to think of the boatpeople as coming in smaller vessels, and that had been the case in previous years. Everything changed from late 1978; this was industrial scale," says Bashall, speaking by telephone from his home in suburban Perth, in Western Australia, where the 92-year-old lives in retirement.

With boats streaming across the South China Sea, sometimes arriving by the dozen every day, Bashall's team struggled to feed, process and provide shelter for tens of thousands of men, women and children, all the while liaising with the UNHCR and foreign consulates in the hope of finding countries willing to take them in.

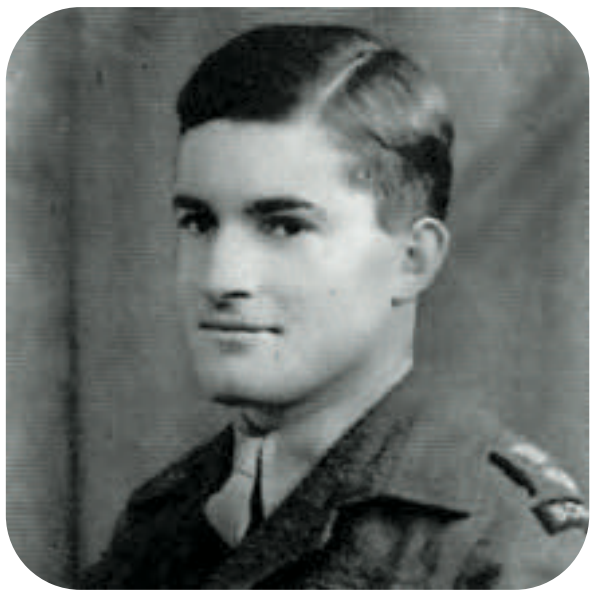
Bashall's diary entry for May 11, 1979, reads, "The storm hit me as the magnitude of the influx became evident. Boats queuing up to get in choking up the approaches. Really a horrific situation." And on May 21 he wrote, "HK is really being clobbered these days, and daily they are coming in."

On May 26, a decaying freighter (smaller than the Skyluck, at 800 tonnes) carrying more than 1,400 refugees had entered Hong Kong. The captain and crew of the Sen On (really the Seng Cheong, with the painted name on its hull changed) had jumped ship somewhere near Macau for a fishing junk, advising former members of the South Vietnamese military among their human cargo to steer for the bright lights of Hong Kong. The refugees were advised not to engage with Hong Kong authorities and immediately to beach the vessel, which they did, on Lantau Island, then to be transferred to refugee camps.

Despite denials from Vietnam, it was now widely accepted that the communist government there, supported by smuggling gangs, was encouraging the exodus of Chinese-Vietnamese citizens, exploiting their financial resources and trading in human misery.

On June 7, Hong Kong's information secretary, David Ford, estimated that Vietnam would earn US$3 billion through the ongoing expulsion of refugees. "We know that the Vietnamese government regards this trade in human lives as a major source of foreign exchange," Ford said. "Indeed, it is now said to have overtaken their largest export earner, their coal industry."

Five days later, in a lengthy dispatch from Hong Kong headlined "Hanoi Regime Reported Resolved To Oust Nearly All Ethnic Chinese", *The New York Times* stated: "Vietnam appears determined to expel virtually all the members of its ethnic Chinese minority and is exacting hundreds of millions of dollars from them before their departure." The report continued, "To encourage the Chinese to depart, they have been subjected to harassment, including loss of jobs, closure of schools, curfews, intimidation by the police and the creation of detention camps."



Above: Talbot Bashall, controller of the Hong Kong Refugee Control Centre from 1979 until 1982. **Below:** Bashall aged 20.

On June 13, refugee leaders on the Skyluck refused to collect food delivered to the pontoon tied beside the ship. "The police kept promising, saying we could land soon," says Quan Tran. "We lost patience, so we tried a hunger strike."

Bashall was dismayed by what he regarded as a lack of gratitude, writing, "Skyluck refugees on hunger strike [...] What a liberty. All uninvited and making demands!" The following day, Bashall continued: "Two letters, petitions, appeared on my desk [from the Skyluck]. One pleading and the other uglier. Refusing food and saying they will starve to death. With the hardening mood of the [Hong Kong] people and Government I suspect they will get short shrift."

Indeed, the Hong Kong public was turning against those washing up on its shores from Vietnam, mainly due to their sheer numbers, and because the territory was paying for their upkeep. "The best way to describe the situation in Hong Kong was that we suffered from compassion fatigue," Bashall says. "It was a deluge."

Many felt that there was an unjust double standard at play: those fleeing Vietnam were permitted to stay while mainland Chinese furtively entering from neighbouring Guangdong province were being hastily repatriated. In the first three months of 1979 alone, more than 8,000 illegal immigrants from mainland China were apprehended in Hong Kong. Despite the fact that many of those people would have had family in the colony, they were sent back across the border.

On June 18, after five days, the Skyluck began accepting food once more. The hunger strike had failed – Hong Kong authorities had not budged.

Believing they had been abandoned by Hong Kong and the international community, and with a lesson having been learned from the deliberate beaching of a freighter on Lantau in May, drastic action, it seemed, was needed if the increasingly restive refugees were ever going to get ashore. On the night of June 28, they took it.

"After the hunger strike, we thought there was nothing more we could do, so that's when they decided to cut the [ship's] anchor chains," says Quan Tran. The refugee leaders, he adds, approached the beaching of the Skyluck like a military campaign.

Young male volunteers were organised into teams, each with strict orders. There was a team for cutting the chains and a security detail to protect the cutters from other refugees (in case there was physical opposition to the action); a group was charged with repelling police once the Skyluck was free of its moorings, and a team would oversee evacuation of the ship in case of any accident.

According to Quan Tran, a heavy-duty hacksaw and 10 blades were obtained from one of the ship's crew, and there were about 10 refugees in the cutting team, working in shifts and pairs (one man wielding the hacksaw, one pouring water to cool the blade). "I think we started cutting at about 7pm, and [it took] until about four or five in the morning to cut both chains."

Before they were severed, the anchor chains were secured with ropes, so the ship would remain fastened, if temporarily, to the seabed. Cut the ropes and the Skyluck would be free in an instant. The job had taken longer than expected, however, and by the time the cutting team was done, the tide was going out rather than coming in. The refugees would bide their time.

By about 9am on June 29, however, baleful clouds were gathering. "I could see the sky getting dark and that a storm was coming," says Quan Tran. "One of my friends, who had

From left: the Skyluck run aground off Shek Kok Tsui, Lamma Island. on June 29, 1979; the same spot today. Picture: Gary Jones

been a navy officer, looked at the sky and said that in 10 minutes the storm would arrive. I went back to the group and told them we should cut the rope in 10 minutes. And that's what we did."

"Not everyone knew about cutting the anchors," says Andy Tran. "They didn't want to announce it properly because of leaks. We were not involved but we heard about it. They were worried that if the police found out, they'd never be able to pull it off."

Quan Tran says that when they realised what was afoot, frantic police "put the sirens on and tried to stop us". Initially, though it was expected that the Skyluck would be pushed into Lamma, the ship drifted towards Cheung Chau as police reinforcements rushed to the scene. "There were many more police boats, and they got two tugboats out," says Quan Tran. "The tugboats tried to get in and push us out, and so Molotov cocktails were thrown around them, to protect the ship."

"I was up top. I was 16, not afraid of anything. It was exciting, things were happening, 'I'm going in,'" recalls Mai Tran, who has no recollection of a storm or even whether it was raining, "I remember it as a nice day," he adds, amused by the thought. "It was a good day for me. I was taking the next step: to get off that ship."

"They were very well prepared with gasoline bombs: they used baby-food bottles filled with fuel from the ship's tank," Andy Tran says of those protecting the Skyluck. "They started throwing them at the police boats, so the police kept their distance."

Eventually, compelled by strong currents, the Skyluck looped eastward and back towards Lamma, its portside flank colliding with the rocky headland at Shek Kok Tsui, north of Yung Shue Wan village.

"The plan was to damage the ship once it had hit the shore, so that tugboats could not pull us back out to sea again," says Quan Tran. "But when the ship hit, I went down to the machine room and I heard the mechanics say that water was coming in, so we didn't have to."

Cargo nets and ropes were thrown down the side of the ship, and many of the younger men, caught up in the excitement of the moment, made for land, some running for the hills. But quickly they realised there was nowhere to go, and were rounded up by police and reinforcements from the British army.

During the course of the day, the refugees were shuttled on boats from Yung Shue Wan to a temporary detention centre – formerly an open prison – on Lantau's Chi Ma Wan peninsula.

That evening, Hong Kong's secretary for security Lewis Davies gave a press conference. "Some persons on board either sawed through or slipped the anchor cables," he said. "This was an irresponsible action since it placed those on board in considerable peril in the weather conditions then prevailing. The ship also posed a potential threat to other shipping."

Under the Shipping and Port Control Ordinance at the time, anyone who scuttled or beached a ship in Hong Kong could be jailed for up to four years and be fined HK$200,000. In their barracks-like accommodation at Chi Ma Wan, the chain-cutting team kept their heads down.

On June 30, with the refugees all safely ensconced on Lantau, Bashall wrote in his diary, "Thank goodness Skyluck is out of the way! What a relief!" The following day, he appeared less stressed than usual in his diary entry, and almost to be enjoying his demanding role. "Towing of boats from DBA [Discovery Bay Anchorage, used as a refugee holding area] to Dockyard the main item today but with Skyluck drama over who cares! Nice to be in the thick of things."

"THEY WERE VERY WELL PREPARED WITH GASOLINE BOMBS: THEY USED BABY-FOOD BOTTLES FILLED WITH FUEL FROM THE SHIP'S TANK"

Speaking today, Bashall says that while he does not condone the refugees' action, it did remove what had been a major headache. "When they cut that anchor chain, in a whisper I can tell you they did us a favour because they solved the problem which had been the bane of my life," he says. "I knew they had to come ashore sooner or later, and this resolved everything."

Bashall's relief in seeing the Skyluck refugees finally housed in a detention centre raises the question, why had they not been allowed to land for so long?

A plan to get them ashore was well underway, says Bashall, and the facility at Chi Ma Wan was all but ready for their arrival when the ship ran aground. "Amazingly enough, I arranged an exit plan for the people on the Skyluck – I must have been psychic – 24 hours before they cut the anchor chain," he says.

This claim is backed up by Bashall's diary, the entry for June 23 stating, "Next week contingency plans for Skyluck are to be finalised."

According to Bashall, the refugees were kept in floating limbo simply because there had been no space for them. "Every time we were preparing to relocate them, other batches of refugees arrived and we had to put it on hold. Refugees were pouring into Hong Kong, 1,000 a day at that time, and we were overwhelmed. In fact, on one day [June 10, 1979], 4,516 arrived in a 24-hour period."

When the Skyluck had entered Victoria Harbour, on February 7, the territory was already accommodating 10,360 refugees, according to a *Post* report. During the months the Skyluck was kept at sea, almost 50,000 more were brought ashore.

"I saw a lot of small boats and other ships pass by, and when they got to Hong Kong they were landing," says Quan Tran of their months on-board. "Only we were kept on the sea."

Supporting this, a *Post* editorial of March 24 claimed that, not including those aboard the Skyluck, "there are now 15,792 refugees here". And Bashall's diary entry for May 2 states that "a staggering 978 refugees poured [in] with a grand total of 23,801. It was a hectic day as they all are these days, with Skyluck hovering always, as we know that the 2,661 [sic] have got to be brought ashore sooner or later. At the moment there's simply no space for them."

The diary entry for May 11 reads, "Over 25,000 refugees here now." May 21: "A long day with over 30,000 in Hong Kong, and 9,000 odd in dockyard." June 1: "Over 41,000 in Hong Kong now." June 10: "We approach the 50,000 mark with great rapidity". June 21: "We now top the 51,000 mark."

On June 30, the day after the Skyluck was beached on Lamma, the *Post* reported that Hong Kong camps were home to 58,667 Vietnamese refugees.

Bashall argues that many small boats were barely sea-worthy on arrival, and so they took priority. He recalls the case of the Ha Lung, which arrived on April 15 (the day before he was given his role with the Refugee Control Centre). As a rule, such smaller vessels carrying refugees were first kept at anchorage, before being towed to a government dockyard transit centre at Yau Ma Tei for processing and health checks, therefore effectively quarantined at sea for a week.

The 35-metre Ha Lung carried some 570 people, of whom more than 200 were children, in what Bashall describes as "deplorable" conditions. "They were jammed in. 'Sardine ship' was the term used by the *South China*

Morning Post. I went on that particular boat and don't know how I found room to stand. It was packed to the gunnels; men, women and children in the most ghastly situation you can imagine." Bashall had the Ha Lung fast-tracked and towed in by April 20.

Those confined on the Skyluck were and remain sceptical of such reasoning, partly due to a rumour that spread aboard the ship: Hong Kong authorities, it was said, were looking for the gold paid by the refugees for their journey. "In the first week and second week, they came every day to search for gold," says Quan Tran. "They brought divers and kept diving around the ship."

Police had told him that they had found about 4,000 ounces of gold – then worth close to US$1 million – hidden on the Huey Fong, a massive freighter carrying some 3,200 refugees that had arrived in Hong Kong from Vietnam just weeks before the Skyluck.

"They searched all the sailors' cabins, of course, and captain's quarters," says Andy Tran of the Skyluck. "They did not find anything. They suspected that they might have hidden it underneath the Skyluck, so they even had divers. We saw them jump in off the police ship to search underneath. Obviously, they suspected we had gold, but they couldn't find any, so they kept us there."

And while those fleeing Vietnam in the years immediately after 1975 were soon accepted as legitimate refugees and resettled in other countries, most notably the US, their increasing numbers from 1978 onwards resulted in reluctance to take in refugees from Hong Kong. In May 1979, 18,688 boatpeople arrived in the city while only about 500 left Hong Kong camps to be resettled in other countries; in June 19,651 arrived and 1,600 departed for new lives overseas.

According to the UNHCR, by mid-1979 there were 350,000 refugees in camps across the region, with tiny Hong Kong holding a disproportionately large share. At this point, the countries of Southeast Asia announced that they would not accept new arrivals, and would even push boats back out to sea. Hong Kong did not join them.

"We didn't turn a single boat away during my posting," Bashall says, "and I was there for three and a half years, day in and day out … I am very, very proud of that fact. There were one or two voices in Hong Kong who suggested that perhaps we turn the odd boat away, but I wouldn't have a bar of it. I saw too much misery first hand."

According to government figures, Hong Kong took in 68,784 boast people in 1979 alone.

Following a meeting convened by the United Nations in Geneva, Switzerland, in July 1979, however, Vietnam agreed to institute an Orderly Departure Programme that would smooth the way for those wishing to immigrate to other countries, and Western nations committed to accelerate resettlement. Though the worst of the crisis was over, boatpeople would continue to leave Vietnam for more than another decade.

By the early 1990s, Hong Kong had taken in more than 230,000, and would close its last refugee camp only in June 2000. In total, the boatpeople crisis cost the city HK$8.7 billion. To this day, the UNHCR owes the territory in excess of HK$1.1 billion for what the government describes as "outstanding advances".

Immediately after the Skyluck ran aground on Lamma, its crew were taken into custody. The captain and five sailors were eventually charged with conspiring to defraud the Hong Kong government by making false representation as to the circumstances in which the passengers boarded the Skyluck. In January 1980, they were acquitted of all charges.

Though the captain and crew had elected not to give evidence in court, their defence had argued that proof of conspiracy existed only in the context of a plot to take the refugees to the Philippines, not to Hong Kong, and that the captain had been forced by the refugees to enter to the colony under duress. The judge said he believed the defendants to be "evil" men who trafficked in human cargo, but that the evidence was insufficient to support the charges.

A screengrab from the film *Without a Promised Land* (1980). Though a work of fiction, the film's opening scenes employ documentary footage of the Skyluck beaching on Lamma on June 29, 1979. Shown are cousins Frank Tran and Richard Quach, waiting to be ferried from Lamma to Chi Ma Wan detention centre, on Lantau.

Also immediately after the beaching, 12 refugees were taken into custody. Ten of them, males ranging in age from 18 to 34, were charged with rioting, four to be convicted. Law Chang, 24, was sentenced to two years imprisonment for throwing Molotov cocktails at police launches; Lac Thanh, 22, who wielded an axe to keep police from boarding the ship, received 2½ years. Two other refugees, identified by police for throwing bottles and cans, were each sentenced to a year. The sentences of Lac and Law were later reduced by six months on appeal.

With Chi Ma Wan being only a temporary solution for passengers from the Skyluck, within weeks they were moved to more established refugees camps, with many heading to the Jubilee Transit Centre, in Sham Shui Po, which was an open camp – run in collaboration with the UNHCR – that refugees were permitted to leave to find paying work in the community (from July 2, 1982, to deter further arrivals, the Hong Kong government introduced a closed-camp policy, with refugees effectively imprisoned like criminals).

Mai Tran found employment at a company making jumpers, inspecting garments for faults, being paid HK$5 a day. Later, he increased his income with a job injecting plastic into moulds to make leaves for fake flowers, for HK$15 a day. Quan Tran found work in a watch factory, making metal straps, and then in the printing section at a fabric mill.

Andy Tran's immediate family were also housed in Sham Shui Po, the adults finding work as assemblers of electronic components. They worked for less than a month, however, before they were on a plane heading for California, having been sponsored by a relative who had worked with the US military in Vietnam and left in 1975. "Because we left so quickly, we never got paid for our work," Andy Tran says, laughing.

In investigating the story of the Skyluck, and wading through newspaper and magazine cuttings, accounts from boatpeople and journalists, and TV news footage from the time, the number of refugees aboard the ship while it was in Hong Kong seemed to change with every report. Stories in the *Post* alone gave a figure ranging with the day from 2,600 to 3,000. The number, when the refugees came ashore, was eventually accepted as 2,651.

Above left: members of the Tran and Quach families, including JoAnn Pham (third from left), Frank Tran (fifth left, at back), Andy Tran (second right) and Bryan Chan (far right), who fled Vietnam aboard the Skyluck, head to new lives in the United States from Hong Kong on September 11, 1979. Picture: courtesy of Bryan Chan. **Above right:** celebrating Christmas in the US in 1980. Picture: courtesy of Bill Quach

It was, of course, difficult to count so many people while they milled about in the ship's maze of holds, stairwells and corridors. John Slimming, the Hong Kong government's director of information services, suggested another reason for the fluctuating figure when, in May 1979, he told the media, "They keep having babies."

While moored off Lamma, the Skyluck had ceased being a means of transport and become a functioning community like any other, with all the associated births and deaths, dalliances and dust-ups, and instances of happiness and heartbreak. The first Skyluck birth recorded while the ship was in Hong Kong occurred on February 10, when a six-pound, 11-once baby boy was delivered. There would be a total of 16 newborns before the ship ran aground in June.

On-board deaths were far fewer. According to refugee accounts, the first occurred before arrival in Hong Kong, on January 30, 1979, when a sick baby died as the ship closed in on the Philippines. The family performed a burial at sea.

When 100 or so refugees had leapt overboard on March 11, to swim to Lamma in an attempt to publicise their plight, one 20-year-old (the Tran family in San Jose remember his name as being Tang On) was later found to have drowned. He was cremated at Cape Collinson, with 30 people from the Skyluck given special permission to attend the Buddhist service.

Bashall also recalls that a woman, aged 78, died while held in limbo off Lamma. "Her name was Giang Vinh, she was the matriarch of her family," Bashall says. "I pulled out all the stops to move her body from the Skyluck to the morgue in Kowloon. No easy job – it took a week of to-ing and fro-ing. Her family got in touch, asking if, as a matter of compassion, they could visit her in the morgue to 'close her eyes', which I assume is an old Vietnamese custom. I arranged for half a dozen of her family to leave the Skyluck and do that, and then they returned."

Romances also blossomed on board. "I was 16 years old, so I looked for girls to talk to," says Andy Tran's brother Bryan Chan, 56, in California. "I found my wife, now my ex-wife, on the ship. I would talk to different ladies at night, and I found one. That was the best thing about the Skyluck."

One love affair that began on the Skyluck ended less happily, however: on August 22, 1979, the freighter's assistant engineer, Nguyen Van Hai, 50, and his 22-year-old refugee lover, Doan Ngoc-can, tied their hands to each other with rope and threw themselves from the top deck of the Cheung Chau ferry in a suicide pact. Their bodies were found the next day.

A note in Doan's pocket revealed how the pair had met on board the Skyluck, and they had become close while the ship was held in Hong Kong. At the time of their deaths, Doan was an inmate at Chi Ma Wan; Nguyen – who was already married – was on bail alongside other crew charged for transporting the refugees to the city.

In early 2019, although the windswept tip of the headland at Shek Kok Tsui, on Lamma, where the Skyluck ran aground, looks much the same as it did in 1979, old photographs reveal the land has become significantly more forested in the intervening 40 years, and getting there requires worming through densely packed trees and clothes-snagging brambles, following faint trails used by weekend fishermen.

Having been seized by authorities but abandoned for months off Lamma, in December 1979 the ship was sold for scrap, for a reported HK$500,000. With the holes in its hull roughly patched, on May 14, 1980, the battered vessel was towed to a ship-breaking company at Junk Bay, where it was dismantled.

There are no signs at Shek Kok Tsui today that this was where the Skyluck came to the end of its working life, and where the lives 2,651 refugees began anew.

Among the first to head on from Hong Kong were Andy Tran and members of his extended family, who flew to California in September 1979. Today, Andy Tran is a musician and music teacher, his brother Bryan Chan, with a master's degree in technology management, is engineering director with a vehicle-fleet tracking company, while their sister JoAnn Pham, a graduate in business marketing, forged her career in customer service and product control.

Their cousin Richard Quach was 17 when they left Vietnam. Having obtained his degree in civil engineering in the US, he worked in that field and as a respiratory therapist. Richard's brother Bill Quach graduated in electrical engineering, and is pursuing a master's in psychology while working as director of security with a technology company.

The five have eight children between them, variously studying in high school or at university, or employed in fields ranging from retail and credit services to software engineering and biotech research.

Quan Tran and his family reached the US in May 1980. A younger brother sponsored their resettlement. He had fled Vietnam earlier via Thailand, and been sponsored himself by a cousin who worked with the US military during the Vietnam war. Aged 30 and with significant responsibilities, returning to education proved unrealistic for Quan Tran. "I tried to get back to school, to become a professional engineer," he says, "but I was so busy working to support the family."

Immediately after arrival in the US, Quan Tran started lessons to improve his English, but had to quit after less than two months. "I needed a job. I got work as a truck mechanic and, with the skills I had, within a couple of months I was promoted to be a trainer. My wife did not work at first because of the children, but two years later we sponsored our parents to come here, and they could look after them, so my wife trained to become a beautician."

Quan Tran is now retired. His daughter, Thao, 44, is a doctor – an allergy specialist – in Seattle. His son, Tom, 42, works in IT in Washington DC. Tom has the Chinese character *tian* (天) – meaning sky or the heavens, and which decorated the Skyluck's funnel – tattooed on his upper arm.

Mai Tran and his sister, meanwhile, made it to the US on January 9, 1980, exactly one year after they had set off from their family home in Vietnam. The entire family was fully reunited, in the US, only in 1990, a full decade later. Mai Tran and his brother went on to build a successful IT company in Colorado, with close to 200 employees, before selling the business in 2009.

Considering that they had to give up so much to leave their country, calling the Skyluck survivors fortunate would be less than accurate. According to the UNHCR, however, while 800,000 people fled Vietnam by boat and made it safely to foreign countries or territories between 1975 and 1995 (with the largest share resettled in the US, and most of the remainder taken in by Australia, Britain, Canada and France), it has been estimated that a further 200,000 to 400,000 were lost at sea.

And although he accepts that life aboard the Skyluck was no easy ride, and he is grateful for the life afforded to him and other refugees in affluent, easy-going California, Richard Quach says he recalls the months spent trapped on a rusty, overcrowded freighter off Lamma Island with perplexing nostalgia.

"I look back on those days, and see that they were perfect days, they were like vacation days; we were really and truly purified, with no burdens," Quach says. "You can have a nice house and a lot of money, but with that there is a burden, you carry baggage. In those days, we had no baggage. We were free." ■

Above left: Bill Quach (far left), Bryan Chan (on guitar) and Andy Tran (on harmonica) provide the Christmas entertainment. Picture: courtesy of Bryan Chan

Above right: California-based siblings Andy Tran, Bryan Chan and JoAnn Pham (seated, from left), and their cousin Bill Quach (standing) in San Jose in December 2018. Picture: Gary Jones