



# Video Story Transcript

## Vietnamese Refugees: An American Immigrant Story

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**Link to YouTube Video:**  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ekx6VMQgOHU>

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Note : The following is a transcription of a spoken story performance and may not reflect textbook perfect English. It will guide you as you listen (or read) along.

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Hi, my name is Susan O'Halloran and I started to learn what home could mean to people on a whole other level when I was involved in an oral history project in 2005. April, 2005 was the thirtieth anniversary of the fall of Saigon, the end of the Vietnam War. And I was hired by the Society of the Divine Word to collect stories from some of their brothers and priests... about 25 folks who had escaped from Vietnam after the war. Well, the story gathering was gonna happen in the day and then in the evening, we were gonna have a public concert... part of our Just Stories-Storytelling Festival. Now, the first man I interviewed, his name was Neil. When Neil was 16 years old, his family helped him escape from Vietnam. But, unfortunately, he wound up, he ended up, in a not so nice refugee camp that wasn't run by the U.N. Neil said that the guards were mean. I mean, they could just throw you in the blockade, no due process whatsoever. Neil, every night in a platform tent with 27 other people, like, lined up like sardines. And they would just get a little bit of food... like a bowl of rice, maybe a little fish, couple of vegetables and that had to last for several days. And most of all, you had to be really careful that nobody stole your food. But Neil made a friend, a boy a couple years older than him named Tom.

Tom had escaped Vietnam when he was 14 years old. And Tom and Neil met in a Bible study class. And as they got to know each other, Tom slowly told his story to Neil. Now, Tom escaped as well, in the bottom of a boat; 64 people hiding at the bottom of a boat. And this captain put fishing tackle, you can imagine all the smelly things, on top of them to hide 'em. And they motored out this channel and they stopped. And everybody was so scared. They figured they must have paid off some guards, 'cause they kept on going. Now, they got out to sea and things were going pretty well. It was just a day or two trip over to Thailand. And then the motor died. And there they sat for two days. Now they hadn't brought food. People escaped with what they had on their backs. Now luckily the captain was bringing some hot sauce to a friend of his in

Thailand. And they had that case of hot sauce. So each day, a couple a times a day, they'd lined up to get just one little dollop of this hot sauce to lick and that was it. No water, nothing!

Well, finally, they saw a ship. They were so excited! "We're over here! We're over here!" But when that ship came closer, they discovered it was pirates. We think of pirates like, you know, Peter Pan or something. It just means pirates at sea. And those men just hopped on board and they took... if people have watches, if they had any money on them, any food, and they even took that motor in case they could fix it. But worse than that, they stabbed all the people so there would be no witnesses and threw them overboard. So Tom found himself in the middle of the ocean. Now, he had the presence of mind, there he was stabbed and bleeding, to take off his pants; kind of like these pajama kind of pants so they had cloth to them. So he blew air in either and tied a knot in either end of the legs and used it like an inner tube to hang on. Now, he doesn't know for sure 'cause he was in and out of consciousness but he knows he went through a night so he was probably hanging there for a day.

And then another day went by and he was having to fight off fish. And finally he thought, "This is it. I'm giving up." And he let go, he started sinking down to the bottom. And he heard this voice inside him say, "No. It's not your time." So he kind of bobbed back up just as he saw this big, red, plastic gas can floating by. So Tom climbed up on that and he hung there for a whole other day. And then another ship came by and this time, thank God, it wasn't pirates. It was Thai fisherman. But Thai fisherman had been told that if they picked up any more Vietnamese refugees, they would be in some big trouble. They would lose their license.

But what are you going to do if you see a kid hanging on a gas can in the middle of the ocean? Thank God, they did the right thing. They stopped and picked up Neil. (Tom) Now, he had hypothermia by then. They tried to warm him up and he were trying to tell them there were 63 other people. And they went around, they motored around, they couldn't find. It seemed Neil (Tom) was the only survivor. So they got him as close to shore as they dare because they didn't want to lose their license. They put him back in the water and Tom, I'm saying Tom, swam back to land. And all kinds of stories but he finally made his way to the same horrible refugee camp.

Now, when they got there, they'd be questioned. "Are you a Communist? Are you a spy?" Because, of course, he showed up with no ID on him. And how you got sponsored if you got out to another country, depended on how you answered these questions and, of course, with this kinda refugee camp, if you had a little money to grease the wheels. And Tom had neither so he had been there for 4 years already when Neil met him.

There's this one day, right before Bible study and they were sitting there talking. And, well, Tom was really down but that wasn't unusual. You can imagine, in this kinda refugee camp, people got very depressed. And Tom excused himself to go to the bathroom. Now the bathroom at this refugee camp was just a hole in the ground with little trees around it for a little bit of privacy. Well, Bible study started. Tom didn't show up. Neil got worried. He went looking for his friend. And he found him. Tom had hung himself. He just despaired of ever getting out of that refugee camp.

And Neil said to me, "Well, they burned his body and sent his ashes back to Vietnam. He finally made it back home. He was caught in limbo all those years; he couldn't go home, he couldn't go forward. And Neil said to me, "When Tom died, it was like a part of me died." And then he looked right at me and said, "I've never told anybody that story before. I have never spoken of Tom before!"

Now, this was my first interview, and like 25 more to go! And I heard these incredible stories of escape and family sacrifice, and idealism and loss. So we got an idea. That night was supposed to be the professional storytelling concert. So I asked some of these brothers and priests if they would be willing to share their stories. So that night the professional tellers did their marvelous, usual wonderful job and then these brothers got up and shared their stories. And I'm telling ya, they stole the show! There wasn't a dry eye in the place. They got a standing ovation. And afterwards, Neil came up to me and said, "You know, it was very painful to share these stories today but important. I have been here for almost 20 years but because of the way this audience, these people, listened to our stories, I feel like I've finally arrived in America. I feel like I'm finally home." And that is the power of sharing and listening to each other's stories.