

Escape to freedom is a drama written in danger

Monday, April 26, 1983 C&E

C7A

by Robert Downes
staff writer

Like two guardian angels of the sea, the whales rose up and bore down on the crashing waves which were slowly driving the small boat full of screaming refugees down beneath the surface of the South China Sea.

One of the whales swam directly before the leaking boat, breaking the waves of the storm which had come crashing over the bow throughout the night. The other whale nuzzled the vessel from below, buoying it up as the people on board frantically bailed with their hands and plastic containers. They had already lightened the craft by throwing most of their possessions overboard, but with the boat slowly sinking in the water, they were still a good five days from Singapore and freedom from the communist rulers of Vietnam.

At first, the sight of the vast dorsal fins breaking the water filled 16-year-old Dan Ho with dread. Already he had taken the machine guns of the coastal patrol, a two-day storm at open sea and the threat of slow death from thirst and starvation. When he saw the fins cutting the waters, he thought they belonged to sharks.

LITTLE DID Ho realize as he sat exhausted on the edge of the vast dorsal fin whales would help guide him and his other people on board to a U.S. Navy ship and from there to a new home in a tranquil corner of America known as Bloomfield Hills.

"We were out for two days with no food or water," Ho said in his searching English as he sat in the conference room at Lahser High School, where he is now a student. "And when the storm came, we thought that we were going to sink. We were already afraid that we would starve."

Colleen Fillmore, who teaches English to Ho three days a week as a second language, said that students often ask to hear the story of how Ho escaped from Vietnam four years ago. She herself has sat in rapt admiration, listening to the story many times in the past. "He's really so remarkable," she said. "The students love him in speech class and can hardly wait to hear him tell his story."

NOW 20 YEARS OLD, Ho is the adopted son of the Walter Stoye family of Bloomfield Hills. A senior at Lahser, he enjoys woodworking, drawing, tennis, volleyball, music, and keeping his Volkswagen in good working order. Sometimes the people close to him affectionately call him the Vietnam Cowboy, from a take-off on his name: "Ho Silver."

His mother, who gave him her blessing to flee Saigon, always wanted one of her 10 children to be educated in the West. Ho plans to fulfill that hope next year when he starts classes at Oakland Community College, heading towards a career as an electronics engineer.

VIETNAM FELL in April 1975, leaving Americans with pictures and news reports of hundreds of frantic people being airlifted by helicopter off the roof of the American embassy in Saigon.

Ho and his middle-class family were not among those who fled with the U.S. pull-out. Instead, they tried to adjust to the new way of life under the communists.

Born and raised in Saigon, Ho said that the transition was hard on his family. His father lost his job as a construction manager and his brother, a recent business school graduate, was denied a job as well.

A junior high school student who worked the half-day he wasn't in class, Ho had to quit school. He had to carry an identification pass everywhere to get through armed checkpoints or risk a jail sentence at hard labor. He felt that he was not a free person in his own country and had a general unease about the future.

UNDER THE NEW government, military service was compulsory at the age of 16. Faced with the thought of being drafted into the Vietnamese army, Ho decided to attempt an escape

to the free world.

One of his friends was a fisherman who had access to a 34-foot boat used to transport people and materials for short distances. Ho and several other friends made plans to escape during the night to Singapore, a trip of about seven days at open sea. They decided to avoid going to Thailand or Malaysia because of reports that pirates were plundering thousands of boat people fleeing Vietnam.

Ho borrowed money from his mother, receiving her blessing to escape. His father, however, was worried that there would be repercussions from the communist authorities.

"My father didn't want me to leave Vietnam," Ho said. "He thought there would be trouble. I didn't say goodbye to my father."

ONE NIGHT in September 1979 under the cover of a fall storm, Ho and his companions set off in their small boat from the coast of Vietnam. The weather was miserable, and it was midnight, a time when there were fewer coastal patrols. The six children and 18 adults aboard the boat were hoping that the late hour and the rain would mask their departure. Since even land travel was restricted in Vietnam, many already had risked their lives getting through the checkpoints along the road to the sea.

Ho and the people crammed together in the boat believed that the storm would die down in the night, but it didn't. Instead, it increased, pounding them throughout the night and the next day and then into the night after that. There were huge waves always breaking over the boat, and many leaks, Ho said. "On the second day of the storm, we threw our belongings overboard."

ALTHOUGH THEY WERE beyond the territorial waters and the risk of capture, it looked as if the boat would founder on the heavy seas. There also was fear spreading through the 24 people on board that they would die of thirst or starvation before reaching safety, as the supplies already lost in the storm. Ho held on to a plastic gasoline container, hoping that it would buoy him up if the boat went down.

"One man said, let's call the whales for help," he said. He does not remember how the fishermen called the whales from the sinking boat, perhaps it was by rapping on the side of the hull.

"I suddenly saw two big fins outside the boat, and I thought they were sharks, but they were whales."

By some miracle of intelligence or intuition, two of the great gray whales came gliding through the tempest to save him. They brunched the waves and buoyed the vessel up, allowing the people on board a chance to bail their way clear.

HO SAID THAT the whales stayed with the boat until the men died down. When the rain had drifted from the horizon, the refugees found themselves in the middle of the South China Sea with nothing but salt water stretching away into the distance. The people on the boat talked over what they should do, deciding to follow the whales, which were bearing away from them. Ho said that they pursued the creatures for about half an hour and then caught sight of a ship on the horizon.

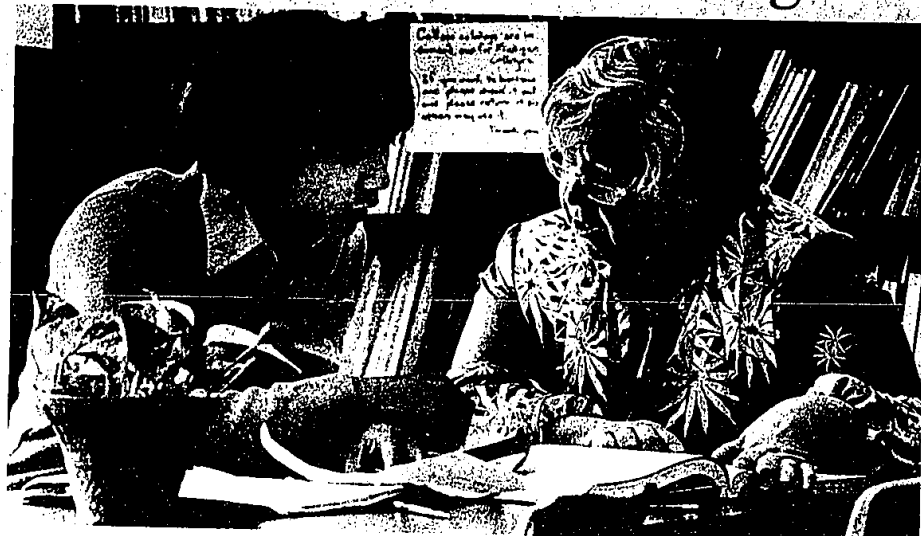
Ho still remembers the number of that ship: 1067, U.S. Navy. The refugees stayed onboard for seven days as it set a course for Thailand. Reaching Bangkok, he and his companions were interned in a refugee camp crowded with people from Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and the People's Republic of China.

"I stayed at the camp for 35 days but it seemed like three-and-a-half years," he said. "I felt despair."

THERE WERE approximately 2,000 people crowded into a small compound in Bangkok and little promise of gaining freedom.

"It was really awful in camp because there was not enough food and clothes and no place to sleep. At first I slept on a staircase. I had no money."

But fortune smiled on Ho and several



Vietnamese refugee Dan Ho works with Lahser English teacher Colleen Fillmore. Students often ask to hear Ho's saga of his escape to freedom, a story of courage and strength.

of his friends when St. John Fisher, a Catholic church in Rochester, decided to help them establish new lives in the United States.

Ho had lost his suitcase during the storm, and he carried what few clothes he had in a plastic bag onto the plane to Okinawa. The plane stopped briefly in San Francisco and then landed in Detroit in the middle of December.

Stepping off a plane from the tropical clime of the Orient into Michigan's snowy winter was strange enough, but Ho wondered how he would make a new start in America. He had forgotten most of the English he had learned in school. "I wondered, how can I live?" he said.

BUT HO STAYED for a time at a place in Pontiac with several other refugees and then was introduced to the

Stoye family. The Stoyes adopted him, and he has lived with them as a son since.

He has since become accustomed to American life and is optimistic about the future.

"I really love this country because there is freedom for everybody. Everybody should be equal," he said.

He now works at the Willoway Theatre, helping out backstage with new sets and props. Every month he writes to his parents in Vietnam, sending them what money he can to help out. His father has forgiven him for running away and is now proud of his son's achievement.

His teacher, Colleen Fillmore, said that she has worked with Ho more than any other student in the district to help him learn English and that the two

have become friends.

"You don't necessarily speak with your voice," she said, describing how she teaches students who don't know any English. "Sometimes you speak with your heart and mind and emotions."

She said that she believes Ho would someday like to go back and visit his native country, but that the day may never come. To keep his freedom, Ho can never return to Vietnam.

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