

## ARTS

## NON-FICTION

## From Pink Ao Dai to Blue Jeans: A Vietnamese Woman's Story

By Shannon McGinnis

Historians today believe that to understand history, we have to look at ordinary people's stories. This focus on the ordinary person is contrary to past understanding of history which focused on history told from famous people's perspectives. Modern historians who took this view of history started the Social Historicism movement in the 1960s. While historians of today may view ordinary people, each person's story is extraordinary because each experience is unique. My mother views herself as an ordinary person with an ordinary, unexciting story to tell. However, I believe that her story is extraordinary. She was born in what we would now call North Vietnam in 1953 (known as Indochina at that time) and lived in South Vietnam during and after the Vietnam War. Though she is not famous and is in fact an ordinary person, her story is so extraordinary because she survived. My purpose in this project is to discover my mother's story and present it in such a manner that my readers will be able to better understand what life was like for a Vietnamese woman whose life was forever changed by war.

In this project, I will trace the life of my mother, Lân Hoang McGinnis, from her birth in Vietnam to her marriage to an American in the U.S. The main focus will be on the time surrounding the Vietnam War and how my mother's life turned out as a result of the war. Although not a detailed history of Vietnam, this project will make connections with Vietnamese history to help readers understand what life was like for a Vietnamese woman during and after the Vietnam War. My mother agreed to be interviewed and talk about the events concerning her life in Vietnam and the U.S.

The following is an excerpt from my mother's story and refers to a time in my mother's life after the Vietnam War had ended. She was one of the Vietnamese Boat People, people who fled the Communist regime in Vietnam by boat to other countries. The following scene takes place during her escape from Vietnam and also when the Thai pirates raided her boat. The main individuals in this excerpt are as follows: Lân (my mother), Thanh (my mother's younger brother), Tien (a girl who escaped with them), and Dinh (her brother who also escaped with them):

One day in 1980, Lân's father asked her, if he could find a way, would she want to escape Vietnam. She replied to him, "I would rather die at sea than live here. There is nothing left here to live for." Her father began the process of looking up old contacts to find ways to escape Vietnam. He used his influence and connections from his old days to work out deals. To this day his family is mostly unaware of how he managed the arrangements; he kept most of his plans to himself. He worked out a deal with another man who had been in prison with him. This man had been an officer in the South Vietnamese military; he would captain the boat. They found a boat somehow and the escape was carefully planned, down to maps and aliases. As part of the plan, Lân was sent to stay with the captain's family until the time was right. Two other girls and their brother stayed there too:

"I just stayed there for weeks and one day my dad came to see us and he gave all of us some money. And then he left. And that was the last I ever saw him. One day someone came and said it's time to go. So, we went on a bus and someone had North Vietnamese soldier's uniforms, not V.C. uniforms. V.C. uniforms are like

black pajamas, these were olive green uniforms. At the checkpoints, I was so nervous, because the stuff for escaping was underneath us."

Though Lân only stayed there for several weeks, it seemed like an eternity to her. Her younger brother Thanh was sent to stay with another couple and pretended to be their son.

Their father carefully prepared for their escape over the course of several months. According to the plan, the family would rendezvous at a small inlet at Ben Ninh Kieu where the boat would come to pick them up. Lân sat on a bench in front of the bus stop by the road, dressed in peasant clothes and the traditional Vietnamese straw hat, which is shaped much like a cone. Thanh and Lân recognized each other immediately, but they had to pretend that they did not know each other. They had not seen each other for nearly two years. Thanh, though he himself was only fourteen, had two younger children with him, a boy and a girl who were the children of the friend of the family who had last sheltered Lân's parents. As the day turned darker, Lân, Thanh, the two children and other people started walking up and down the beach. Many of those people were escaping too. The boat was late in coming. Everybody was becoming nervous. Most of the other escapees were either acquainted with Lân's family or had been in prison camps. Many people in the group, Lân, Thanh and the two children included, went uneasily back to the bus station to lie on bamboo mats in the open air and wait:

"Then we went to Ben Ninh Kieu, there was a park and we walked there all night long, just back and forth, back and forth. And it got so late, and we didn't see anyone, so this guy, our connection, he came and told us that he didn't see the boat, so he said, ok let's go back to the bus station. So we went there and we rented bamboo mats to put on the ground in the open air and just laid there."

As the evening wore on and everyone was becoming tense, a man finally came running up from the beach. The boat had finally come. The rest of Lân's family did not arrive in

time, so only Lân and Thanh escaped on this trip. Though several people wanted to wait longer for Lân's family, the boat had to leave because of the tide. Lân later found out that her family was almost captured on the way to the rendezvous point, which forced them to return home and try to escape again another time.

Eighteen people were on the boat. They stayed inside the cabin of the boat during the day and could only come out at night, because they knew that it was possible that they were being watched by the Communist shore patrol. They circled around for days hoping that more people would show up, but when no one did they were forced to leave on the fourth day. To avoid possible suspicion, they had to make it appear as though they had no set destination;



Shannon McGinnis, 06-07 President's Cup Winner

however they actually had a carefully charted course and plenty of rations. The group was well prepared, and even had Communist (not V.C.) uniforms and weapons just in case a patrol boat did decide to take a closer look. They had to use these uniforms once when they passed a village of boats as they were passing Ca Mau, the southernmost tip of Vietnam. Lân and a few others put on the uniforms to keep up the charade that they were a patrol boat. Lân quickly ducked back into the cabin, however, when she overheard someone on another boat say, "Oh look, that V.C. is so white." They continued past the boat village without further incident, until they were suddenly spotted by a real patrol

He'd never walk again, and might even lose that leg, but at least he was alive, and as Parker saw it, that was much more than the bastard deserved.

It was over in a matter of mere seconds, although Parker was sure it had been hours. The gun-smoke started to clear away. Frantic step on the boardwalk outside announced the arrival of the local law, attracted by all the shooting and shouting.

According to the very few witnesses that had stayed to see how events would pan out, Matthews had, indeed, drawn first. So, legally, it was called self-defense. Although Parker resented it, he had the doc sent for. He would have preferred to let the outlaw bleed his life out on the sawdust covered floor, littered with broken glass and splashed with whiskey, among other things. But he had to remind himself that dead men tell no tales, and that he needed Matthews alive. He could never hope that the bastard would confess, but maybe his mere presence would lend enough truth to Parker's version of events.

"I wired that Sheriff Daniels, like you asked me to," a young man said, derailing Parker's train of thought.

The mention of that name stopped him cold. Where did they stand now?

boat which then began to chase them. They managed to outrun the boat and reached international waters where they were safe from the Communists preventing them from escaping. It took them four days to leave Vietnamese waters and reach international waters.

Once they reached the open ocean, they spotted quite a few large ships, but none stopped to help them. In the afternoon of the third day at sea, Lân and her shipmates spotted a ship on the horizon. Several of the men on board called the girls out of the cabin and told them "make yourselves look really tired, like you need rescuing and maybe they will stop and help us." Lân thought to herself that this was a really stupid idea, since they had plenty of food and a set course. They approached the ship and once they were close enough, Lân saw Thai characters written on the side of the ship and she knew immediately that they had made a huge mistake. She screamed, "Thai pirates!" The pirates were naked to the waist and as their huge ship bore down on the tiny boat, Lân and everyone on board could see them laughing, their teeth gleaming white in their dark, suntanned faces:

"I'll never forget, those pirates, they were so big, so heavy and they were laughing. Their teeth were so white, they were very dark and they were laughing. And I ran inside the cabin and we tried, but we couldn't outrun them because they were very big and we were just a little boat."

Lân ran into the cabin and as looked at the brother of the two girls, she saw the horror she felt reflected in his eyes. The two children and the two other girls started crying: "Tien, Dinh, and the other two girls started crying and I told them, I said pray, pray. I never prayed that hard in my whole life. Suddenly, I felt so calm inside, I was not afraid at all." At this point, the pirates started jumping down onto the boat. One of the girls gave Lân a gold ring and told her to throw it into the water. One of the young men also gave her a nearly two-inch gold statue of the Buddha. She pinned the statue to the inside of the lapel of her shirt. Lân went to the stern and sat on the edge of the boat:

"I was sitting on the edge at the back of the boat. I was looking down at the water and I saw the water, it was clear water with a lot of white specks in it. And I was sad, I said to myself, why does my life have to end like this,

They could not rightly be called friends, not after what Parker had almost done, not after that night getting out of jail. But could they rightly be called enemies? Buck had never drawn iron, it was the others that had done all the shooting that killed Parker's horse, and almost killed him. Buck had tried to get him to see a doc for his leg that started throbbing again, now that the fight was over and his nerves were beginning to calm. But maybe that last part had only been his duty; after all, lawmen were meant to look after their inmates.

It was too confusing. Parker pushed all that to the back of his mind. What had happened ... well, that could never be undone. And right now, there were more pressing matters at hand. "Any response?"

"No. Not yet." He hadn't expected any; not so soon. "Very well then." As a way of ending the conversation, he slipped a coin into the boy's hand.

Parker turned and walked over to the bar, which now sported a few new bullet holes. He made a point to walk around where Matthews's blood had stained the floor.

"Bartender," he said. He needed a good, strong drink.

if they try to do something to me, I will jump off the boat and drown myself."

At the same time, she was thinking that it would be a waste to throw the ring into the water, so she simply dropped it into a crack at her feet. The pirates called everyone to the back deck. The pirates began to search everyone. Lân still felt the calmness from earlier, but as they were searching her, she pretended to cry. Later on, the men from her boat would tease her for just pretending and not actually crying. The pirates somehow missed the gold statue in their search and let Lân go into the cabin. She feels as though fate played a hand in these events, guiding her actions and keeping her safe from harm. As she walked into the cabin, she saw some small bottles with a small amount of diesel fuel still in them. She walked over to them without thinking. She felt as though some spirit was guiding her and she dropped the statue into one of the bottles. As soon as she did that, the pirates called her back out again because they had found the ring where she had been sitting. The minute she walked out, one of the pirates grabbed her chest and the pirates searched her again thoroughly, but found nothing. If they had found the statue, she feels certain she would have been raped. During this time, the captain kept begging the pirates in Vietnamese (which they didn't understand anyway, as they spoke only Thai), not to hurt any of the women, since they were his sisters (though they weren't really) and to take whatever they wanted.

They took the propeller. The captain started cursing them and said, "They took the propeller!" Fortunately, the boat had another engine, so they were still able to function. The pirates left the ship and threw some fish and ice to Lân's boat, which was perhaps their way of paying for what they had taken. Everyone on the boat was shaken, but thankful to be unharmed. Many other boatpeople were not so lucky; they lost much more than just a propeller and a gold ring. Many boat people were killed, maimed, or raped during pirate attacks. Lân heard rumors of pirates capturing women and imprisoning them on islands where they were kept as sex slaves. Lân and her group were very thankful that they escaped with so little loss. Later that night they spotted land. After a journey of three days and three nights they had finally reached their first destination: Malaysia.

"You're free to go," Buck said in a voice that was cold and sharp, like the edge of a knife.

Another look at the evidence by an impartial judge two or three towns over, and the fact that Travis Matthews was at last behind bars due to the 'courageous actions of this fine young man,' had, if not proved Parker's innocence, at least granted him amnesty in the eyes of the law. Parker was relieved to hear that; he could finally walk down his town's streets without being shot at or set upon by hounds. He could finally go home.

He nodded, and turned to leave, intent on saying not another word. But something made him stop. Buck had already started to bury himself in the mountain of paperwork on his desk. He had not bothered to look up, to see if Parker had found the door.

"Buck, I..." Parker struggled for the words. How do you talk to a man that had been closer than a brother, and that had almost died at your own hand, - and would have, had it not been for some random fluke of fate? "When I was stuck under that horse and you..."

"Leave," Buck interrupted, not raising his voice, but instead shuffling through another dated stack of wanted posters.

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