

# Far from home:

Think's journey to safety

Tita Tran, aged 12

It happened 20 years ago but I remember it all as if it happened just yesterday. These experiences changed my life forever.

Many people wouldn't believe what I suffered. It still makes me cry and it hurts me just to think about it. I have kept it to myself for all these years, but today, I would like to tell everybody. I hope doing this will take away the pain and sorrow that I have kept to myself for so long and help my soul to heal. I also hope that by doing this more people will realise that not everybody is lucky and not everybody can have a totally happy life.

My name is Nguyen Tan Think.

It was the year 1980 just after North Vietnam took over South Vietnam. I was only 19 years old. I attended Binh Chieu High School. I had short, straight, pitch-black hair. I was skinny and quite tall for my age. I lived in a family of nine kids, including me. I had five sisters and three brothers. I was the youngest in the family – and also the luckiest because my brothers and sisters adored and spoiled me. But when I think about what happened to me, I think I was really unlucky.

I can never forget the day I heard the news. I was walking home from school when I came across a North Vietnamese soldier. I said 'Hi' to him to be polite and he asked to see my school books. He said he wanted to see what students were taught nowadays. I stood there quietly as he looked through my books. I suddenly remembered something as he flipped through my writing book. The original flag of Vietnam was still in this book. I prayed he wouldn't notice it but he did – I guess this was my bad day. I expected him to at least hit me but he ripped the whole page out instead.

Then he said, 'You know now that North Vietnam has taken over and the new flag is the one you must have in your book! You know the one with the yellow star and red background? Not the old flag with the yellow background and three red stripes! I thought you were a clever boy; I almost considered that I should not send you to war with Cambodia but now, you will help fight the war for us. From now on, you are no longer a student. I expect to see you tomorrow morning at Trai Bien Hoa!'

I knew that Trai Bien Hoa was a place where they trained soldiers. I tried telling him that my family was too poor to buy me a new book, so I had to keep the old book with the old flag. I knew the North Vietnamese did not like the old flag, so I should not have had the old flag anymore. But he would not listen to me at all, so, defeated, I just continued walking home with a sick feeling in the

bottom of my stomach.

I was sad. I knew that my family would be very sad and worried for me. I had seen them react that way when they found out that all of my brothers were expected to go to war. Should I just tell them the bad news straight away when I got home, or should I slowly bring it up during a conversation? I felt like crying but I stopped myself. Someone might see me. After all I am a boy and boys are only expected to bleed, not shed tears. That was an old saying that meant that boys should be tough and not soft or able to show any emotion.

When I arrived home my mother was worried and asked me lots of questions.

'How was school Think? Why did you take so long to get home? Was everything all right? You didn't hang out with friends or have a fight, did you?'

I just couldn't answer her. I told her that there was nothing to worry about. I told her that I was old enough to look after myself. My mother started yelling at me because she knew that the North Vietnamese soldiers patrolled the streets and she also knew that I still had the old Vietnamese flag in my book. She was worried that the soldiers would beat me for this but she just couldn't afford a new book.

Some people would think this is a silly reason for anyone to beat you but North Vietnam soldiers were strict and bad

tempered. They would attack you if you did something they didn't like.

I shouted at my mother and told her not to worry but I was worried myself. However, I didn't let it show. If I had she would have been even more worried than she was. My mother was shocked; I usually never did anything rude to my elders. She looked really hurt and sad. I suddenly felt ashamed of myself; I shouldn't have been rude to my mum. I shouldn't have told her not to worry and I was old enough to look after myself. That is considered as answering back and being cheeky to your elders and to Vietnamese people that is extremely rude if you are a child.

My mother started yelling. I didn't quite understand what she was saying. I must have got caught in my own horrible thoughts while she rambled on. I decided that it was better if she knew the truth.

'I'm sorry, mother. I shouldn't have tried to hide things. I shouldn't have answered back or raised my voice at you, either.'

My mother must have seen the sad, worried look on my face because she calmed down straight away.

'Tell me what happened, Think,' she replied soothingly.

I told my mother about what had happened during my walk home but I stopped when I got to the part about the flag. I just couldn't carry on.

'Go on, Think, what happened? Don't worry, do go on,' my mother encouraged me.

I nodded and finished telling her the story. I told her that the soldier said that I would have to help fight the

war against Cambodia. I apologised to my mother and told her that I should have listened to her and ripped the page out. I also shouldn't have lied about what happened but I couldn't help it. I knew how sad she would be when she found out that I had to go to war.

There was a silence for a few moments. I could tell my mum was really sad and shocked. She sobbed.

'What am I going to do, Think? All your brothers are expected to go to war! Now you are going as well! There is a very slim chance that all of you will survive. What am I going to do?'

I tried to comfort her but I couldn't. There was nothing I could do so I went into my bedroom, lay on my bed and thought about what I should do.

After a while an idea hit me. I could simply run away and come back after the war had finished! Or maybe I could even settle in another country!

I didn't sleep well that night. I was worried. I planned to leave home at one o'clock the next morning. I accidentally overslept and woke up at one-thirty. I quickly packed and wrote a goodbye letter to my family. It read:

*'Dear Family*

*I am sorry, but I have to leave. I will go to another country and settle down. That way I can escape going to war. I will come back when the war has ended. If I really enjoy the new country, maybe we can all move there. Please send me letters and money, although I will not be able to reply except when I need to tell you where*

*I am. At least by doing this, I have a better chance of surviving and coming back. Once again, I'm sorry. Don't worry: I can take care of myself. I'll miss you all, but I have to go. Love, Nguyen Tan Think.'*

I left the letter on the kitchen table and set off to find the perfect country. I knew the journey was going to be tiring and dangerous. I hitched a ride on a truck that was going to Cambodia. I knew it was heading that way because I had asked politely with a casual interest. Luckily for me the truck driver was lonely. He had to deliver things all the time so when someone talked to him he would tell them anything.

I soon found out that the truck was transporting bags of cement and lots of bricks. I thought this was the best way to get to Cambodia without having to pay or walk. I could easily hide behind the bricks and use the bags to sleep on. I felt bad for doing something dishonest, and there was a chance of getting the driver fired if they happened to find me in his truck. But I just pushed the thought away, thinking that I could leave him a little bit of money when I left.

Just as I got into the truck I got scared, because I knew that there would be no way of turning back after this. Going to a country I was meant to fight against was going to be very dangerous but I had to take the chance, because that is the easiest way to get through to Thailand and safety. From Thailand I had planned in my head to somehow travel to Australia or America.

The journey on the truck was rough. I closed my eyes for a while. A bang woke me up. I didn't have a watch, but I had brought a small clock with me. It was eleven pm. I had been asleep five whole hours! That was dangerous – I could have been caught. I hadn't even asked the driver for a ride. I had just climbed into the back of the truck because if I had asked him he would have said no, and if he had said yes, he would probably have charged me a fortune.

I opened the door at the back of the truck and looked around. I was at a petrol station. The bang must have been from the slamming of the front door. Nobody was around, so I climbed out.

I hid behind a bush and looked around. Where was I? I caught sight of a banner saying Ha Tien Karaoke. I must be in Ha Tien. For once I felt lucky. Ha Tien was near the border of Cambodia.

I got back into the truck and hid myself carefully. I hoped to get some more sleep as soon as the driver got back. I would get off the truck as soon as it had passed through the border of Cambodia. I hoped that the truck would not be searched. Soon afterwards I heard the driver return and we began our journey to the Cambodian border.

I was lucky. The truck was searched but during the ride bricks and cement had fallen on top of me. They hid me from view and the soldiers were too lazy to check through the pile. The bricks and bags were heavy. While I was asleep I didn't feel a thing, but my body ached and I had some bruises and cuts afterwards.

I still felt nervous, even though I had not been caught. Any time now the truck might stop and unload, which meant I had a chance of being discovered. I was lucky, once again lucky. The truck did not stop until early next day and then the driver only stopped to fill the petrol tank.

I slowly opened the door and got out. I left five hundred thousand dong for the driver. I also left a note saying, 'Thanks for the ride.' Then I ran away as fast as I could. When I thought I was a safe distance away I stopped and rested. After a while I went around to ask directions. I was lucky that I was taught Cambodian and Thai in school. Some people looked at me angrily and walked away.

I soon found out from a nice old man that I was only eight days away from the border of Thailand. I thanked him and set off to find some food.

I bought things I needed for the journey. I also wrote a letter to my family and sent it. I said that I was heading to Thailand. When I was ready I set off.

I was really tired for the following days because I had very few breaks. I wanted to get to Thailand quickly. I soon became thin, weak and dirty. I don't think my own mother would have recognised me in the state that I was in. Being safe and alive kept me going. On the eighth day I reached the border. It was early in the morning. I hoped they would let me through.

When I reached the two soldiers who were guarding the border I stopped. They asked me where I was going and why. I told them I was going to Thailand because I was running away from my country, Vietnam. They nodded and then

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It seemed that they had planted bombs under the ground and had expected them to explode and kill me. I was horrified that a person could do that to another human being

started talking to each other quietly so that I couldn't hear. They then turned toward me. One of them threatened to shoot me and the other stripped me of all my money, food, valuables and clothes. They left me with only my old shirt and pants. After that they let me go. I hurried away but several metres further on they stopped me again. I could hear them arguing. It seemed that they had planted bombs under

the ground and had expected them to explode and kill me. I was horrified that a person could do that to another human being.

I was soon locked away in a cell. The cell was cold, damp, dirty and smelly. I also saw a few rats crawling around in the corner. I was fed only rice and was only allowed salt water to drink. Sometimes they would let me out to find vegetation to eat. I never tried running away because the soldiers always accompanied me. The only vegetation I could find to eat was grass, bark and leaves. The soldiers would enjoy this and would laugh at me crawling around looking for something to eat. After that they would lock me up again.

At midnight every night they would wake me up and splash freezing water on me. It was so cold I would become numb. I tried not going to sleep so as not to endure this torture, but I was too tired and weak.

After they had woken me they would take me to a different room. They would tie me to the ceiling by my toes and beat me with a hard stick. The pain was unbearable even through the numbness. I couldn't help screaming loudly and crying. That would make them angry and they would hit even harder. They also told me what a baby I was.

While they were hitting me they asked me questions. They would ask me why I was here and who I was. They thought I was a spy.

I would always reply the same way: 'I am Nguyen Tan Think. I live in Bien Hoa. I only came here to run away from Vietnam because I didn't want to fight in a war.'

They would never accept the answer and would just hit harder.

I always feared those times. I even put up a fight once, holding hard onto the door of my cell. But that only caused me more pain; they would get a metal pole and hit my fingers. I never tried that again. The pain was unbelievable. I never tried anything else either. I was sure anything would result in more pain and agony.

The Thai soldiers also took all the money that my family sent me. I knew because they would show me the letter and then take away the money. They never let me send anything. They said posting it was a waste of money and I might tell my family what was happening.

One day I got the courage to ask them for a pen and paper. I quietly wrote a letter to my family, asking them to help me but not to send any money. I put it in a stamped envelope, which I had hidden under the straw in my cell. Luckily they had not searched me properly when they first captured me. I bribed a soldier to send a letter for me and he agreed.

Two weeks later while I was sleeping, somebody opened my cell and dragged me out. I heard a gruff voice saying in my ear,

'You may be lucky, but if I ever find any proof that you really are a spy you will die slowly and painfully!'

I was scared. Where was I being taken now? I soon found out. I was taken out of the jail and a letter was shoved in my hand. The guard then quickly shut the gate and walked back inside.

I opened the letter which said that my family had paid the Vietnamese Government to help me. There was a trial and I was proven innocent. I was free but I had to stay in Thailand for four years. I was paid back all the money the soldiers had taken from me. I was so happy that I jumped for joy.

During the four years in Thailand I learnt and taught English. I had a happy life. Four years later, in 1984, I left Thailand. I stowed away in a boat that transported goods, with about ten other Asian people.

We were found by a man who worked on the boat when he went to inspect the goods. We were then left at an island near Thailand. I cannot recall the name because I was never good at geography. I had no idea where the island was and knew little about where other countries were in relation to the island.

We were stranded on the island for three months and soon ran out of food and water. People soon couldn't help themselves. They drank water from the ocean then died soon after.

We got to a stage where people went crazy, or were so hungry that they ended up eating the dead people. I was so sad and scared, just sitting there and watching things happening in front of my eyes. I was too weak to move or do

anything. I stopped myself from eating people or drinking sea water. But deep down I knew that one day I would go crazy. I prayed and hoped that we would be saved soon.

My prayers were answered because an Australian ship happened to come by and see us. The people that were left were overjoyed. There weren't many of us, only four. We all were taken to Australia.

Some people died soon after they reached Australia. Some went crazy. Some got jobs and lived happily. I was one of them: I now work in a factory putting goods into packages. I live alone and am now 41. My dad has died, so has my brother Hoan and sister Mai. My brother died after the war and my sister died of pneumonia. My sisters Son and Thi are also in Australia, though their journey was not rough. I see them sometimes. The rest of my family are still in Vietnam. One day I will help them migrate to Australia, so our family can reunite. But for now, I will send letters and money. I really miss them.

I do feel a little better now that I have told everyone my story. I hope you will understand and appreciate what you have. Not all people are born in a rich land. Not all people can live easily. Not all have happy lives. I am one of those unfortunate people. I hope by telling you this story you will understand the suffering some people have to endure. Many of us have hidden secrets and pains from our journeys or sadness because of the loss of loved ones.