

Geointeresting Podcast Transcript

Episode 20: Christine Staley, Part 1

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On April 30, 1975, the North Vietnamese Army took over Saigon after the South Vietnamese president surrendered in order to avoid further conflict. The Vietnam War and its effects left many Vietnamese citizens facing a difficult decision — stay in their politically unstable country, or risk everything to leave.

From 1975 to the early 1990s, more than 2 million refugees fled Vietnam by boat and ship — they have become known as the boat people of Vietnam.

Christine Staley, currently an assistant inspector general for audit at the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency, is one of the boat people of Vietnam and has an incredible story about her journey that brought her here.

This is part one of her courageous story. Welcome to Geointeresting.

NGA: So first I want to say thank you for sharing your story with us.

Christine: This is my first time sharing my story publicly, so I'm excited about it, but understand that this is very emotional for me.

NGA: Absolutely. We're honored to have you talk about it.

Christine: Thank you.

NGA: I was hoping we could start with the beginning of your journey. What was it like when your mother made the decision to take her family and flee Vietnam?

Christine: So, we lost South Vietnam April 30, 1975. And we spent five years with the communists, and during those five years, we worked very hard — my parents. And I was 14. And we worked very hard to try and escape the country. But you have to realize that it's really difficult because you don't know who to trust. There were a lot of people who tried to escape and failed because you paid money or paid gold to the wrong person. So it took us a long time, but we knew from the very beginning that there's no way for us to stay. We lost freedom completely. Because the communists just took over South Vietnam and tightened their control really, really, really tight to make sure there's no turnover from the previous government. They had so many different levels of controlling from your personal life, even to me being a student in school. I was threatened many times to be put in jail because I was not active enough within the new government. And because the background of my family, they assumed we were guilty when they see you. I finished high school in Vietnam, but I could not apply for college because the application went back three generations of your family to see whether you did anything against the communist government. So I didn't bother to apply because I knew there was no way I'd pass the application part to be able to be accepted into college. I had no future there, I had no freedom there; the entire country. So we knew that we had to escape.



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NGA: So when you left Vietnam, you didn't come straight to the United States, correct?

Christine: No. I spent seven and a half months in the refugee camp. But before we got to the camp, it was the journey on how we got there. My escape is another story. I remember one day, I came home, and my two brothers had disappeared. There are six of us, and I'm the oldest one. My two brothers, they disappeared, and they're not home. So I said, "Mom, Dad, where are my brothers?" They were like, "We can't tell you. Just go to bed." And so I went to bed and wondered what was going on. And then my mom woke me up at midnight and she said, "You are leaving the house with this man, you and your sister, at midnight. Just go with him. Don't talk to him. You're not allowed to say anything to him. Just go." I said, "What's going on?" She said, "We've found a source for all of us to escape, so just go." So we left. My sister and I left the house at midnight. We followed him down to the other side of town, and he dropped us off at a stranger's house. There's a couple of women there who just took us in. They were very pleasant, comforting and said, "Don't be scared. Stay here with us, and someone will come and pick you up at three o'clock in the morning." So we just sat there, the two of us, and we were so scared. I was 18 [and] my sister was 16. And then at three o'clock, another man showed up, and again, the instructions were, "Don't talk to the guy." So we got on his bicycle, and then he dropped us off in the middle of nowhere in a dark, farm area. Now we're following a third person, and we follow this guy in the middle of a rice field, the rice paddy. In Vietnam, they divide the rice paddy, and in the middle they walk on top of mud. And this guy just walks on mud, slippery, like you walk on the ground. And I came from the city. I didn't know how to walk to this mud. I kept falling off, and I looked at my sister, and we're about to break into tears — we can't follow him. And we thought we were going to lose him. So we tried really hard, to the point that we were crawling on the mud just to try to keep up with him. And he turned around and looked at us and gave us a pathetic look like, what are you two? We tried to follow him the best we could because we didn't want to be left behind. So he walked us all the way to the end of the rice field and then up in into the river. So we got on a boat with him. And by that time, we can see the daylight. And he finally spoke with us and said, "Just stay low on the tiny boat." There was only enough space for three people, and he said, "Just lie down."

NGA: It was just like a rowboat?

Christine: Right. And he said, "Just don't let people see you." He got us to the other side of the river, and he dropped us off and then just took off. And I stood there, and now we can see daylight, and I looked at my sister and said, "What are we supposed to do? If we stand here, people are going to see us; they're going to arrest us if we just keep standing here." So I said, "Let's go into the forest." It's like a mountain, and he just dropped us at the bottom of the mountain, and I told my sister, "We need to climb up; we need to go deeper so that people don't see us." And we go into the forest, and I think, where do we go from here? We had no instruction. And so we decided that we were going to climb up because if we stood here, people would see us. So we start climbing up the mountain, and we start hearing noise up there. So we come closer, and we can hear noises and hear that people are up there. When I came closer, I saw my two brothers. They'd been there the day before. So my parents didn't want to send us all at once, so the two disappeared at one time. So my brothers are up there with a whole bunch of people. They came from different parts of the country. Not all the cities have access to the water like my hometown. My hometown is an ocean city. All the people from other cities came to us, and they stayed up there in the mountain. They'd been there for like a week. At least we'd just shown up there. Then I said, "Now what?" So we just sit and wait. They don't tell us

anything. Just in case someone shows up and asks us questions, we don't have any information to render. So we waited and waited and waited. And I heard rumbling outside the cave and a guy yelling at another person. He was saying, "If you're scared, then don't go, but you decided to go, so don't be scared now." He was yelling at the woman. And we could hear the woman saying, "I am so scared. I am so scared. I don't want to go anymore. I'm so scared." And the guy kept yelling at her, and she kept saying that. And I start laughing with my sister, and I listened some more, and I said, "It sounds like Mom." And I said, "Mom is that you?" And she heard my voice, and she was so happy — with my two younger sisters. So now there's six of us. She said, "Oh my gosh. This man was so rude, and it was so dark, and he keeps yelling at me." And I said, "Mom, you should be OK. We are all here now." And the guy dropped off my Mom and my two sisters and said, "We are going to leave at midnight tonight, so two hours from now." At midnight we got the signal from somebody who came in and said it was time to go down. At the moment we were high up in the mountain, and now we have to go down to the water to catch a boat. We all hurried up and went down, and it was so dark. Everyone was moving silently because we don't want to make any noise or attract any attention. We went down to the shore, and we can see a boat; small boat. It can't come any closer, so they have to basket. So there's a basket; the basket fits about four people. You sit tightly on the basket, so they can transport you to the boat. Now I have to say, the culture in Vietnam is as a woman, you have no place in society. Men represented the family. Now all of a sudden ...

NGA: You're without your father at this point.

Christine: All of a sudden, it's my mom and six children. All the other families eventually got in a boat, except for us. My mom is there with the six kids, and she looked at the four of us, the four older ones, and said, "Jump in the water. Don't wait for them. They would leave us. Because if something happens, they would take off without us, so jump into the water, and get out there." So four of us jump into the water, and we swim out there. They finally picked up my mom because I was yelling, "You've got to pick up mom!" They finally came in, and on the basket picked up my mom and my two younger sisters. We all got in the boat and took off. That was at midnight, and I don't remember much after that because very shortly we got on the boat, and when we got out there, we got hit by a big storm, and I started to get sea sick. Pretty much, I passed out. We were hit so hard by that storm the first few hours we got out there. They threw everything off the boat. I remember having a small backpack with a pair of clothes and some dry food that my parents packed for us. We got nothing left; they threw everything off the boat. We spent six days and six nights on the boat. Finally, when the seasick hits you for three days, after the third day ...

NGA: You're used to it?

Christine: Yes. I felt better, so I started climbing into the upper deck and see my sister. One of my younger sisters was really good at keeping us updated and keeping track of my mom and my sister up there. So she would send a message down there and would say, "Ask for Tram," which was my Vietnamese name, and tell the people down there my mom and the troopers are OK up here. Then she would try to send some fruit down to us, but it's hardly anything that gets to us. I remember six days and six nights, the most I had was the cap of the coke bottle; a cap of water a day. After a while, your body gets used to it; you don't feel hungry anymore. Toward the end of the escape, the owner of the boat; he was the lead for the escape. He called us, whoever possible, that would fit on the deck, just come up here and listen to him. I remember he

stood in front of us, and said, “You know, I have very good intention to bring everybody on the boat to make the escape because my family is here with me too. My family is here with you, so we are all in it together. I am sorry to report that we have enough oil and water until 6 o clock the next day, and as of today we don’t know where we are going. We are just drifting right now. 6 o clock the next day, that’s the end for us. I am so sorry, but you know that I’ve put my family at risk just like everybody together. So what I’m asking [is] whatever religion you are in, start praying. In Vietnam we have two main religions: Confucianism and Taoism. We had both on the boat, so we start kneeling down [and] we start praying. At that moment in time, I remember the water was so calm. It was about six o clock in the evening; it was just beautiful. Very peaceful. The water was so calm. When you look around, it’s nothing but water. The blue sky; just so calm. At that moment I wasn’t scared. Mentally, I accepted the fact when I escape communism, I’m willing to die. I’m not going to stay. I’m willing to die just to get freedom. When he said that, I just felt really sad, but I wasn’t scared. We all kneeled down and started praying. People later on in life asked me if I’ve seen a miracle. Yes I have, on that day. What happened when we started praying — these three big fish; they were huge. I don’t know what kind; just really big, three on each side of the boat. The boat is drifting straight ahead [and] the fish somehow shifted the boat 45 degrees. We’re all screaming, “Oh my god. Look at the fish! Where did they come from?” They came out of nowhere, and they’re shifting the boat. Some people; they screamed on the boat, “Just hold on to the control. Don’t let the boat the shift!” but some people said, “Come on; listen, we just prayed. This is a miracle. Let go; just let go. Just follow whatever the boat shifted. Just go with that.” The fish shifted it 45 degrees. Just as quickly as they appeared, they disappeared. Now the leader made the decision to follow the new direction. We don’t know where we’re facing now, but we all have hope now. It seems like somebody listened to our prayers. And I went back down to the bottom of the boat and stayed down there, still praying the whole time. I feel very sad, but I was calm. By midnight somebody was screaming on the top level, “Did you see that? We see light! We see light! Oh my god!” You can see all the motion. Everyone was just so excited. There was a very tiny light from a far, far distance. I don’t know how that person saw it, but he did. We came closer and closer and closer to that light. We got there, and we got in the basket to transport people. We didn’t want to come too close to the light because we didn’t know what was back there. We didn’t want people to be ...

NGA: You didn’t know where you were.

Christine: Right. The two men and the women, the person who can speak English — actually, my English teacher back in Vietnam. She got in the boat and with two guys, and they paddled over. It seemed like forever before they returned back, but they reported back that “That’s it. We found it.” There was a floating station for a fishing company, a fishing ship, but this was a floating dock for them, and there’s one guy on it. He’s actually calling this ship to report that there’s refugees nearby. So the ship is coming back; it’s a Filipino fishing company that works for America.

NGA: So you had made it to the Philippines?

Christine: Yes. We were in the Philippines water, but we don’t see any land yet. By 4 o clock, like four hours later, I saw the entire city of light moving towards us. I swear I felt like we were in heaven. Oh my god, it was so enormous. Just lights coming towards us. It was the fishing ship that came towards us because they got the signal that there were refugees. So when they came, we were just so happy. It’s strange, going back to my comment earlier; in the Vietnamese

society, men come first. When this ship came, the order was, “We want all the women and children to get on the ship first.” That was the first time ever in my life that I was introduced to the concept of women and children first. There was no such thing. The first time I heard that we all got scared; we were like, “This is the pirates. Why would they want the women and the children? Why don’t they want the men? Men are supposed to go first. Right?” But no, they insisted the women and the children would get on the ship first. Eventually, we all got on the ship. They turned out to be really nice people. They were not pirates. Eventually, we all got on the ship. [There] turned out to be really nice people there. They were not pirates. They are just fishing men, and they gave us clothes, and they shared with us their t-shirts; everybody can share. They cooked so much food for us, and they gave us clean clothes, so we can shower and change. By daylight, by 6 o’clock, I remember walking out to the real deck of a ship. I looked out, and they dragged the boat a lot. They have to go really slow now. If they go any faster, they will break the boat. They said, “We cannot.” The instruction from the Philippines government is you’re not supposed to rescue refugees anymore. This is 1981, 1980 we’re talking about. There’s a lot of refugees. All the nations are tired of picking up refugees, so they said, “But we cannot just leave you out there. We want to help you, but we have to take the boat, so [when] we eventually take you near an island, you guys have to get off the ship and get on the boat and go in there yourselves and don’t mention us.” That was the instruction. I remember by daylight, it was like 5 or 6 o’clock in the morning, [and] when I looked down, the boat is like a dot in the water. I remember standing there, and I just started crying. How is it possible; did we make it on that tiny boat? We did. It was overwhelming, I said, the price that we pay to get the freedom. They took us to an island, Tara Island in the Philippines. The refugee camp is there, so you are in good hands now. Just get on the boat and stay there. You will hit the island soon. Sure enough, we got on the boat. They gave us some magazines, and they gave us some Filipino money. From what I remember, they were really, really kind. In return, our culture is we always return favors, so my mom had a gold ring on her hand, and other people have gold rings on their fingers too, so my mom took off her ring and gave it to the leader from our boat. We all pitched in, and my mother said “Give it to the captain as a way for us to thank him for being so kind to us.” It was probably nothing to anybody, but it was all we had. I thought it really showed our appreciation, and it showed our culture.

NGA: We are going to stop here for now. But this is only part one of Christine’s story. Join us in May in honor of Asian Pacific American Heritage Month for part two of our podcast, where Christine details her life in the refugee camp and how she felt when she learned she and her family would be going to America.

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