

THE “2005” REUNION OF USS KIRK FF-1087’S CREW

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Dear Readers,

On October 8, 2005, in Orlando, Florida (Ai-Khanh’s [3] lovely city), a purposeful reunion between former US Navy sailors and Vietnamese refugees took place. The story, resembling a fairy tale, is quite emotional. I, reporter Mai Vy, would like to summarize the whole story:

The May 7, 2005 issue of the Nguoi Viet Daily News in California featured several articles marking the 30th anniversary of the beginning of refugee life for thousands of Vietnamese people. Among these articles, one written by Mr. Vu Quy Hao-Nhien has especially caused its readers to shed tears by invoking the memories of their escape from Vietnam during the last hours of the “Black April” of 1975. The Vietnamese refugees could never forget the humanitarian assistance they have received from the US Seventh Fleet warships operated in the Pacific Ocean at the time. Beginning the last week of April 1975, these ships were ordered to remain in the international waters next to the Vietnam coast to rescue Vietnamese refugees. Mr. Vu devoted two full pages of his article to the story of one of these refugees who escaped by sea, “Where to find a girl named after the USS Kirk? Former sailors are looking for a baby girl born in Subic Bay after having been rescued by the ship”. Interested readers can find the article in the home page of the Nguoi Viet Online at www.nguoi-viet.com (Tel: 714-892-9414), posted on May 6, 2005. It was also printed in the Nguoi Viet Daily News, issue number 7091 of May 7, 2005.

According to the story, Captain Paul H. Jacobs of the USS Kirk FF-1087, besides his duty of rescuing the refugees, extended his care a little bit further by providing help to the sick people needing urgent medical treatment and to the women who, with their pregnancy advancing into the later stages (seven months and beyond), were susceptible to the risk of premature delivery due to the hardships incurred during this fateful and unexpected voyage to freedom. He then, via interpreters, has made known his will to have all the seriously ill and pregnant women brought to USN ships for proper medical care. Among those patients was a small boy who

suffered pneumonia and died, despite the heroic efforts of the medical staff. This was the saddest moment for Captain Jacobs. He ordered a sea burial for the boy, following the official Navy ceremonial protocol. The nine pregnant women who were brought onto the ship were housed, together with their families, inside the VIP lounge. Captain Jacobs visited them daily and jokingly told them to hurry up and deliver a baby for the USS Kirk. He also assigned a person to tend exclusively to the needs of the refugees on the ship. It was Mr. Donald P. Cox, a helicopter crew member, whose fly unit was grounded due to lacking of spare parts.

The ship should have reached the Philippines in few days. However, on the way, it received the order to return to the Vietnamese coastal areas to escort former RVN Navy vessels to the Philippines and to give assistance to other refugees' ships. This stretched the journey length to 12 days. When the ship was due to make the turnaround, Captain Jacobs ordered his crew to keep the operation secret, to maneuver only at night and to make the turn slowly, thus preventing the refugees from panicking (I think that Captain Jacobs, in addition to being a good and thoughtful leader, is also very compassionate). After having unloaded all the refugees onto Subic Bay, the USS Kirk returned to the coast of Vietnam once more. From Subic Bay, the refugees, on the basis of first-come-first-serve, were orderly transferred to large cargo ships heading to Guam Island. A few of the women had delivered their babies in Subic Bay and had to stay there until the next load of people arrived. Others eventually reached Guam. One delivered a baby on May 18, 1975 (baby Vien-Phuong), and another did on May 22, 1975 (baby Kirk). A few days later, for some mysterious reasons, the USS Kirk returned and anchored at Guam. Captain Jacobs, together with a couple members of his crew, came to the Naval Hospital to visit the sick refugees. And right there, he met again the pregnant woman who was once transported by his ship, and learned that the name "Kirk" has been chosen as the middle name for her newborn baby girl: Tran-Nguyen Kirk Giang-Tien.

Life silently passed by and time quietly slipped away. However, in people's hearts, the memory still lingered. In 2004, after 29 years, the first reunion of the USS Kirk crew took place in San Diego. The ship captain and all crew members decided that they must be reunited with their adopted child. They utilized all possible available means for this purpose: checking the mother's name from the records of the Immigration Services and other civilian -- as well as military -- institutions, and enlisting the help of the media, especially the media within the Vietnamese community. On the internet, Kirk crew members have established a Special Search Operation for finding Tran-Nguyen Kirk Giang-Tien, and Mr. Jim Bon Bongaard was in charge of this search effort. By some inexplicable miracle, Mr. Bongaard was connected with the Nguoi Viet Daily News and received valuable assistance from this news agency. Perhaps deeply moved by the kind actions of the US Navy toward the Vietnamese refugees in the past, reporter Vu Quy Hao-Nhien responded wholeheartedly in his article with exceptionally kind words about the USS Kirk and sent out emotional appeals to the Vietnamese community.

And finally, the good news came. The baby's mother read the article and contacted Mr. Bongaard right away. An overjoyed Captain Jacobs telephoned his former

Executive Officer Richard B. McKenna, who is currently the Deputy Director of the Marine Exchange in San Pedro, CA requesting him to contact baby Kirk and her mother as soon as possible since Mr. McKenna was living near Long Beach, CA. The meeting took place inside the office of the Marine Exchange (the control tower monitored all ships moving in and out San Pedro harbor). Mr. McKenna took the picture of both mother and daughter, as requested by Captain Jacobs and other crew members. Thus a second article, a follow-up story, was again written by reporter Vu with the title: "The daughter of the evacuation: the baby girl with the name Kirk has been located" in which was described the detailed evolution of the story. The internet version was posted on September 30, 2005 and the printed version appeared in the issue number 7238, published on Saturday October 1, 2005.

An invitation was sent to Kirk Giang-Tien and her mother, requesting their presence at the Reunion of the USS Kirk crew in Orlando, Florida, on Oct 8, 2005. The family of Kirk Giang-Tien gladly accepted, knowing that this was their opportunity to meet again with their benefactors and to present to them the heartfelt expressions of the gratitude the family has nurtured in their hearts for the last 30 years.

Mr. McKenna -- on the same flight with Kirk Giang-Tien, her mother and her brother -- was in charge of ferrying them to their hotel. However, while still wandering in the Baggage Claim area, they experienced a big surprise. A big bouquet of red roses was brought to baby Kirk's mother by a man. It was Captain Jacobs! And a bouquet of yellow roses was handed to Kirk Giang-Tien by Mrs. Sandra, a close friend of the captain. They were all deeply moved by the fact that Captain Jacobs came to greet them, in person, at the airport. He embraced each one of them and asked baby Kirk's mother how she still recognized him after 30 years of separation. Mrs. Lan replied that she could never forget the respectable ship captain as well as all the good deeds that he and the whole crew of the USS Kirk did for her family and for many other refugees 30 years ago.

As soon as Kirk Giang-Tien and her family walked into their hotel room, the phone rang. It was Mr. Bongaard summoning them to Suite 1802 to meet Captain Jacobs and other impatient members of the Kirk crew. They dropped their unpacked luggage on the floor and hurried upstairs. Thunderous applause greeted mother, daughter and son. They were embraced by everybody in the suite. One person said through tears: "I'm glad you guys could make it". And another one, jokingly: "Which one is Kirk"? People took turns to have pictures taken with all three. A beaming Captain Jacobs shared with everybody the sweet memories about the time he served on the USS Kirk and his involvement with the Vietnamese refugees at the time. Most of the people present in the room were former sailors serving on the Kirk during the Operation Frequent Wind (in April 1975) and were involved in the rescue of the Vietnamese refugees. However, there were also other sailors who served on the ship either before or after that period. They said that it does not matter whether they were on the ship before or after 1975. The story about "baby Kirk" touched their hearts and that is why they were there to support and to meet the USS Kirk crew's adopted child.

People were joking, talking, laughing, teasing each other, reminding one another of the good old days when they were still sailors. One thing was quite apparent: people all love and respect Captain Jacobs and feel very close to him. To them, he is a father, full of love and compassion. Mrs. Lan asked Captain Jacobs how, in the boiling heat during the evacuation and with the heavy burden of caring for thousands and thousands of refugees, he still had time to think of the few gravely sick people and pregnant women. Captain Jacobs answered that a good leader should be able to foresee possible events and set up his priorities accordingly. At the time, he had received a long list of patients with their health status. He had to decide in a short time who would be the first ones to receive care. In some instances, as soon as the patient was identified and given the green light to be taken aboard, the patient passed away. The captain was extremely sad about those cases, but had to suppress his emotions. He crossed out the patient's name from the list and moved on to the next one. Being married and a father, he understood the needs of pregnant women approaching their delivery dates. Special care was required.

The former sailors also showed each other the souvenir items collected when they were in service. Looking at them, people knew that the meaning of the motto of the former RVN Army "Huynh Đệ Chi Binh" (loosely translated as: soldiers consider each other as brothers) still applies in this case. The only minor difference is just the skin color. Some people donated their souvenir items to be used as prizes for the raffle drawing the following day (the official day of the reunion).

Not until that evening did Kirk Giang-Tien et al. have the chance to meet Mr. Cox (the former helicopter flight crew member) and his wife. They embraced each other tightly and Mr. Cox murmured: "We will never lose each other again! Thirty years of separation are enough!" Mrs. Jackie Cox, having herself adopted a Vietnamese sister after the Tet Offensive (1968) and having lived in Vietnam for quite some time because her father worked in Saigon, feels very close to the Vietnamese people. Mr. Cox said that he gave special care to Lan and her mother because she was too young (17 years old) at that time and she reminded him of his own sister in the States. Furthermore, Lan was alone without her husband, a RVNAF pilot. Mr. Cox jokingly told everybody in deliberate broken English: "Back to that time, I'm not speak Vietnamese and Lan had broken English, but some how, we don't know why we understanding each other perfectly". Mrs. Lan then continued the story. She remembered that Mr. Cox gave her the address and the phone number of his girl friend in California and told her that, upon arriving in the U.S. and not being able to be reunited with her husband, she should contact this person for help. For his part, as a sailor, he had to move around without a permanent address and would not be able to give her assistance when needed. Mrs. Lan also showed everybody two pictures. In the first one, she was standing in front of Mr. Cox' helicopter (this picture was taken by Mr. Cox). The other one showed Mr. Cox in his full navy uniform and was autographed and dated by himself. These two pictures were taken in the same occasion using a Polaroid. Mr. Cox also said that he still keeps similar photos in his family's album.

Also on this Thursday evening, Mr. Bongaard announced that he had just received an email from a young man stating that his name was Bao Pham, the son of Mr. Pham Xuan Vinh, an interpreter shuttling between U.S. war ships and Vietnamese boats in 1975. Mr. Vinh's wife was one of the 9 pregnant women admitted to the USS Kirk with her 4-year-old son Bao at the time. By chance, Bao heard about the Kirk Reunion, and, although getting the news a little bit late, he managed to book his flight and hotel room and planned to meet everyone at the Reunion party on October 8, 2005. "Wow! It's very nice!" everybody said. Capt Jacobs was particularly happy. He said that all the dispersed birds would gradually find the way to eventually reunite with each other. Last year we had less, but next year we will have more. "The word will spread out, and sooner or later they will know about this reunion. And more crew members and Vietnamese will come to the next reunion. It will be great".

Saturday October 8, 05 was the Reunion Day. The official program didn't start until 7:00 PM. However, by 6:00 PM, the reception starting time, all participants were already present, joyfully shaking hands and exchanging words from their elated hearts. The former sailors, in their neat outfits, were real "gentlemen" in the crowd. One, with his white navy uniform fully equipped with all military honors, insignia and decorations, looked truly fantastic. He must love his military career tremendously, judging from the fact that he reverently carried to the reunion a whole box containing souvenir items from his military life. Mr. McKenna jokingly said that now people know who took away all the supplies of the US Navy. The gentleman just smiled and replied that these are personal items issued to him by the Navy. Everyone was laughing. Captain Jacobs wore his normal white uniform. By his arrangement, Kirk Giang-Tien sat next to him, followed by James Tran (Kirk Giang-Tien's brother), Bao Pham, Mrs. Lan, Mr. and Mrs. Cox, the captain's son and finally Mrs. Sandra who ended up on his right side (circular seating style).

Reporter Vu, despite being terribly busy with his work, managed to be present at the party. People reserved for him particularly warm feelings and high regards, not only because of his article that has enabled the Kirk crew to be reunited with their adopted child, but also because of his noble profession and his admirable compassion. He sat next to the former Executive Officer McKenna and the ship's former medical doctor.

Among other participants was former LTCDR Pham Dinh San, commanding officer of the PCE Chi Linh HQ-11 of the RVNN. He was noted for his close involvement with other USN ship captains during the evacuation of thousands of Vietnamese in 1975 and his current wholehearted support for the Giang-Tien's family. He also brought to the reunion a sacred souvenir item in response to the request of Captain Jacobs and his crew who wanted to see it once again (this item will be mentioned later). It was quite a surprise to note that some friends of LTCDR San, when they heard about the baby Kirk's story, have made arrangements to be there to support Giang-Tien's family, in spite of the difficulty of arranging such a long-distance travel within such short notice. This kindness surely constitutes a great encouragement for baby Kirk and family.

At 7:00 PM sharp, the MC of the reunion invited everybody to stand up and face the US flag for the Flag Salute Ceremony. It was followed by Captain Jacobs' opening remarks. Applauses and happy whistling sounds greeted the beloved captain. He then handed out the appreciation plaques to the organizers of the reunion. Applause thundered and camera flashes filled up the air as Captain Jacobs handed the 2 plaques to Giang-Tien and her mother.

After dinner was cleared, the MC invited Mrs. Lan and Kirk Giang-Tien to the podium to give their words of thanks. Mrs. Lan, donning her light blue traditional Vietnamese dress (áo dài) decorated with glittering waves similar to the ones of the ocean, and Kirk Giang-Tien, in her dark blue dress, gracefully walked on stage amid a roaring standing ovation. Mrs. Lan, barely able to control her emotions, gently asked everybody to sit down. The audience devoted their complete attention to every single word she uttered. Halfway through her speech, when describing her feelings during the time she was trying in vain to locate the USS Kirk crew members, she choked up with tears and had to speak slowly while trying to control her emotions. The whole auditorium was completely silent, and everyone allowed their tears to flow freely, following their own emotions. Kirk Giang-Tien, standing next to Captain Jacobs, grabbed and held his hand tightly when she noticed the tears in his eyes. Then, seeing that her mother was crying too, she hurriedly put her hand on her mother's shoulder. She was visibly very confused and did not know what to do when, looking down to the audience, she also saw rows and rows of wet eyes. Fortunately, after few minutes, her mother regained control of the emotions to continue. And when she finished the last part of her speech with: "Thank you, USS Kirk crew members. Thank you, people of this wonderful country. May God protect all of you and your families. God bless America", another standing ovation, mixed with tears, erupted. (the speech is being printed in this issue).

Next came Kirk Giang-Tien's turn. She said that, as a child, she kept asking her mother why her middle name was "Kirk" while both her last name and first name are purely Vietnamese. For her, "Kirk" was not only an American name, but also a boy's name. However, upon hearing the explanation from her mother, she was very proud of this special name "Kirk". Most of her friends from Kindergarten to High School are aware of the origin of this name. And today, after 30 years, she finally has the opportunity to meet those people who have extended a helping hand to her own family and also to thousands of other Vietnamese families. "And now, standing in front of you is the baby the USS Kirk has adopted 30 years ago". At these words, Giang-Tien's voice stiffened and she cried uncontrollably. Everybody stood up. Among the applause, people could distinctly hear: "We love you, Kirk". The cameras were working at full speed recording the scene of the official reunion between the members of an extended family: Captain Jacobs, Mr. Cox, Mr. McKenna, Mr. Bongaard, Kirk Giang-Tien and her mother. Next, Kirk Giang-Tien and her mother presented the commemorating plaques to the six benefactors, namely: Captain Paul H. Jacobs, Executive Officer Richard B. McKenna, anti-submarine helicopter aircrew Donald P. Cox, Operation Specialist Jim Bon Bongaard, Nguoi Viet Daily News reporter Vu Qui Hao-Nhien, LTCDR Pham Dinh San (the former Commanding Officer of the PCE Chi Linh HQ-11 of the RVNN). The 7th and last gift item was a very special one and was solemnly presented to all

crew members of the USS Kirk. It was a Navy wooden Marine Steering Wheel on which is engraved a picture of the USS Kirk surfing the ocean waves. Right behind the Kirk, with the blue sky as background, was the image of baby Kirk (3 months old) and her mother with the following golden words inscribed:



Kirk Giang-Tien stressed the significance of this souvenir item as follows: "We would like to present this meaningful token of appreciation to the whole crew of the USS Kirk. Thanks to this steering wheel, you have changed the direction of our itinerary, by guiding us out of the danger zone and leading us to the land of peace, freedom and happiness". Captain Jacobs received the gift on behalf of the whole crew. He stated that this souvenir item is very highly regarded and he hoped that a suitable display location could be found for it, so that all Navy personnel could have a chance to admire it, because it symbolizes the most beautiful aspect of a sailor's life. In his opinion, that location might be the Naval Museum. Everyone was surprised and filled with emotions by the sight of the Marine Steering Wheel. They couldn't believe that baby Kirk was so "thoughtful". We have learned that the plaques and the Steering Wheel were made by the company Golden Trophy & Awards in Westminster, CA. The owners of the shop, Mr. Tony Hoai (a poet with the penname Hoang Thuong Dung) and his wife Mrs. The-Thuy, were touched by this story and wanted to contribute something to commemorate the humanitarian assistance provided by the USS Kirk to the Vietnamese refugees. With this in mind, Mr. Hoai devoted all his mind and heart into producing these artful items in record time. Mrs. The-Thuy disclosed that whenever Mr. Hoai wants to do something, he just goes ahead at full throttle and does not care about food or sleep. Mr. Hoai said that he did this because Mrs. Lan told him: "If possible, please engrave the US and RVN flags onto the plaques". And that struck the right chord. By mentioning the Yellow Flag with Three Red Stripes (the RVN's flag), Mrs. Lan and baby Kirk won his

heart and he was willing to share everything with them (similarly to the case of his close friend, former captain San, who, because of the word "Vietnam", is willing to provide a helping hand to his compatriots whenever they need it).

The MC then solemnly introduced a special guest who served in the RVN Navy and, during some time in the past, worked very closely with the US Navy: Captain San. He then recounted his saddest and most painful experience of his life, which was the moment when former LTJG John Pine of the US Navy asked him for permission to board his ship, the PCE Chi Linh HQ-11 to conduct the ceremony of replacing the RVN flag on the ship with a US flag for command exchange. Due to the fact that the Republic of South Viet Nam no longer existed after the fateful date of April 30, 1975, the Philippines wouldn't let the ship enter its waters without the US flag (to show that it was a USN vessel). Mr. Pine personally preserved the two flags as legacy items of the Vietnam War. A couple months later, on a weekend, LTJG Pine and his wife located Mr. San and paid him a visit. What a joyful and emotional reunion! At the end of the dinner, LTJG Pine gave Mr. San the two historic flags of April 30, 1975 that he had safeguarded all these months. (How moving and noble are the sentiments that allied soldiers have for each other.)

At Mr. San's request, two former US sailors raised the two conjoined flags. Emotion filled the whole auditorium as everybody stood up and applauded. Next, Mr. San introduced the Vietnamese friends (who are also former members of the RVN Navy) of baby Kirk's family and asked them to step on the stage with their families to have a picture taken with baby Kirk and her mother next to the two flags. Cameras again were flashing. Mr. San himself could not conceal his emotions when recounting the tragic moments of 30 years ago. His American friends expressed their admiration and understanding for his feelings.

A minute of silence was then observed to commemorate the fallen heroes.

Now came the raffle drawing, a very exciting moment indeed. The prizes were the souvenir items of the USS Kirk. People were watching the randomly drawn numbers carefully. The happy screaming of the winners has greatly warmed up the atmosphere. Some Vietnamese guests also won these souvenir items, especially the family of Mr. Trong Lam who was lucky enough to win two precious prizes: the emblem of the USS Kirk and a large picture of the USS Kirk heading to the high seas with the signatures of all present crew members. A beaming Mrs. Lam said that the prizes her family won are the ones she wanted to have from the first time she saw them. Mrs. Lan asked her why she liked so much these two items which are really related only to the USS Kirk. She smilingly said that she admired all the humanitarian services provided in the past by USS Kirk crew members and for that reason, she wanted to bring home some of these symbols.

Former RVNN Commander Chu Ba Yen and his wife happily announced to everybody the recent victory of the Resolution honoring the flag of the former Republic of South Viet Nam in the city and county where they are residing. Their daughter and son were also accompanying them to this reunion. Both have garnered academic as well as professional success, and, best of all, were still able

to preserve for themselves the cultural traditions of Vietnam. And the 4-year-old Pham Bao of 30 years ago now has finished college and is currently working in New York. Pham Bao, Kirk Giang-Tien and James Tran have quickly become friends and were exchanging memories about the Kirk and information about their schooling and career activities.

The reunion officially concluded in the Banquet Room of the hotel. However, people were moving afterwards to Suite 1802 to continue their heartfelt conversation and to take more pictures. Reporter Vu, despite of the fact that he has to be at the airport early the next morning, lingered on due to the emotional attachments with the new American friends. Mr. San sat next to Captain Jacobs, the 1975 Yearbook of the USS Kirk crew widely opened in front of them. Captain Jacobs wanted to have Mr. San's signature on the Yearbook. The two heads, one black and one grey, were bent close to each other. They showed each other the pictures of their military life. For old soldiers, nothing could be more beautiful than these memories!

Other former sailors also brought books and notebooks to have them autographed by Kirk Giang-Tien and her mother. One former navy man gave Mrs. Lan a sailor shirt, with the name of USS Kirk embroidered on the shoulder. Mrs. Lan tried it on, and when photographed with a sailor in uniform, she also gave a military salute, just like him. Looking at the picture afterwards, everybody agreed that it turned out to be a very nice one.

It was deep into the night. Still nobody wanted to say good-bye. However, even good things must end. Captain Jacobs finally stood up and gave the dismissal order.

Embedded within tight embraces and warm flows of tears were the repeated promises to see each other again next year in Washington State, USA.

END

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Dr. Luong, on April 30, 1975, had also evacuated with his family to Subic Bay aboard the RVNN Ship PCE HQ-11.

[3] Ai Khanh is a female reporter of the Women Forum magazine, locally resided in Orlando, FL.