



The Indochinese Movement: Fortieth Anniversary

Ed. Note: Thursday, 30 April 2015 marks the 40th anniversary of the Fall of Saigon, which touched off a series of events that resulted in Canada's largest refugee resettlement operation. This issue of the bulletin marks that anniversary by making the event our feature topic.

The Human Side of the Fall of Saigon

Peter Duschinsky

In the spring of 1975, North Vietnam and its proxy the Viet Cong redoubled their attack against the fatally weakened government of South Vietnam. Saigon fell to the Communist forces on the last day of April. During the same time, the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia and the Pathet Lao in Laos successfully brought to a close their wars against the governments in Phnom Penh and Vientiane. South Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos fell in quick succession. By early May 1975, all of Indochina was ruled by Communist governments. After a series of interconnected wars lasting almost three decades, the West's dominant role in Indochina came to an end.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that, in the course of the Indochinese wars, some 20 million people—more than half of South Vietnam's population—was uprooted at one time or another. As well, there was an enormous rural-to-urban exodus: the population of Saigon grew by two million. In Cambodia, which had a total population of 7.5 million, the human cost of the war between 1970 and 1975 is estimated at 500,000 dead and 2 million internally displaced.

The international community initially maintained that the problems of population displacements should be addressed within the region. Then, when some 125,000 refugees fled Vietnam, most countries considered Indochina to be an American problem and resisted the internationalization of the emerging refugee crisis.

Yet the crisis was real beyond any expectations. Within the population that had served in South Vietnam's military and bureaucracy or was part of the heavily Chinese or Catholic commercial and professional middle classes, there was a well-grounded fear of the conquering Communist forces. Reports of cruel punishments in areas captured by the invading forces against all people deemed to be U.S. collaborators or class enemies circulated in the capital.

In March 1975, panic overwhelmed South Vietnam. On the 29th, civilians, including women and children, attempting to escape on departing planes at Danang airport, were shot by South Vietnamese soldiers. Six days later, a U.S. Air Force C-5A crashed soon after taking off, killing 135 of the orphans and escorts on board. The Danang incident, the crash of the "baby flight", and desperate Vietnamese civilians left behind on the roof of the U.S. embassy were the sad ending of the Americans' long war in Indochina.

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A report by a *New York Times* foreign correspondent on board a Seventh Fleet vessel described a terrible humanitarian emergency:

About 71,000 Vietnamese abandoned their homes, their possessions, and often their families, and put out to sea in tiny fishing boats or ungainly barges in hopes of finding the Seventh Fleet. How they knew where we were is a mystery. The first day, Tuesday, we were only 17 miles off the coast near Vung Tau, at the mouth of the Saigon River. By Wednesday we had moved out to 40 miles and later, because of the rumored sighting of a North Vietnamese gunboat, to 70 miles. But they came anyway. When we awoke on Wednesday morning there were 20 fishing boats off our starboard, all crammed with people, many of whom looked like poor fishermen. The *Mobile* had orders to take on people only by helicopter and we had to refuse them. Some United States sailors openly protested, asking their officers why we were leaving them. A Vietnamese Roman Catholic priest in the bow of one wooden fishing craft bent to his knees and prayed to us to take him aboard. But we could not and the boats were pointed in the direction of the rest of the fleet where half a dozen merchant ships under charter to the Military Sealift Command were embarking evacuees from boats.¹

By the beginning of April, Canada's foreign policy establishment realized that South Vietnam would fall to the Communists within a few weeks. The initial Canadian diplomatic assessment was that Canada's "future relations with a Communist-dominated South Vietnam or a unified Vietnamese state would not be important" and the new Vietnam would have "no bilateral interests for Canada"². However, even as Saigon was under attack, requests went from the U.S. State department to its Western allies for a multilateral program to resettle refugees fleeing the Communist takeover. Most did not react positively to the request. Canada did.

Thus, during the final days of South Vietnam and in the months immediately following the fall of Saigon, Canada's main role in Vietnam rapidly evolved to become humanitarian and refugee related. Even before the city's fall, in response to strong representations by Vietnamese residing in Canada, Canada agreed to admit family members of Vietnamese residents. By 1 May, the government had agreed to admit refugees from Cambodia and South Vietnam as well. Canada's reaction to the refugee crisis would include not only "relatives sponsored or nominated by Canadian Citizens or residents", but also 2,000 non-sponsored refugees in U.S. refugee camps and 1,000 others in Southeast Asia. In this, Canada was the first nation, after the U.S., to establish first a sponsored-relative program and then an Indochinese refugee program.

In the chaotic conditions of the Saigon evacuation, with a very small diplomatic representation, no military presence, and no Canadian immigration officers on site, the challenge to fulfill our commitments was daunting. Canada's Department of Manpower and Immigration (M&I) rapidly put in place policies, people and mechanisms in Canada and in Southeast Asia to meet this challenge.

On the policy side, Immigration Minister Robert Andras emphasized to Cabinet that, following well established Canadian traditions, "humanitarian considerations ought to be regarded as paramount". In order to demonstrate the even-handed, non-political nature of Canada's program, Minister Andras highlighted the similarity of Canada's humanitarian efforts in South Vietnam and Chile. What was important in both these movements was "solely to alleviate human distress, without regard to political or any other considerations", not taking into account whether refugees were fleeing from a right-wing military coup in Chile or Communist conquest in Indochina.

The first, unexpected, challenge M&I faced was dealing with representations from Vietnamese in Canada and their Canadian friends and relatives attempting to help their desperate countrymen—"unexpected" because, in early 1975, Canada had only a very small Vietnamese community, mainly in Quebec. There were 1,204 Vietnamese immigrants during the five years preceding 1975 and 1,500 French-speaking Vietnamese students studying in Quebec.

Despite these small numbers, as the situation deteriorated, Ottawa Immigration headquarters was deluged with thousands of offers of help and guarantees for family members in South Vietnam. The small team on the M&I Asia-Pacific desk could not cope, and the whole of the headquarters foreign service contingent swung into

action. Sponsorships were processed, and telexes with lists of names were sent to Canada's embassy in Saigon as fast as possible. Officials worked 14 to 16 hours a day. Two officers slept at the External Affairs communications centre to ensure that incoming and outgoing messages were dealt with promptly. And every immigration centre in the country remained open on one weekend to accept Indochinese sponsorship applications.

In early April, M&I directed the Immigration sections in Hong Kong and Singapore to deal with the situation in Saigon. The Canadian high commission in Singapore had primary responsibility for visa processing in South Vietnam, and so Gavin Stewart at Immigration HQ phoned John Baker, a visa officer in Singapore (for whom it was the middle of the night), telling him to get on a plane to Saigon as quickly as possible. Once there, Baker saw that Saigon was in a state of war: even as his plane landed, he witnessed smoke and explosions near the airport.

In Saigon, Baker's first challenge was to contact all active immigration applicants as well as people whose desperate relatives and friends were sponsoring them in Canada. For those in or close to Saigon, this was a difficult but theoretically feasible task. However, with no mail, no phones and shooting in the streets, it was impossible to contact those outside the city's immediate surroundings.

In order to leave South Vietnam, people needed exit permits as well as visas, and these were almost impossible to obtain, except for those with connections and the resources to pay bribes. Meanwhile, the high pressure work being performed in Canada was bearing fruit: every morning, the Canadian embassy in Saigon received a 20- to 30-foot-long string of telexes with names and addresses, often incomplete, of relatives of Vietnamese in Canada.

Each day the streets of Saigon were becoming ever more tense and frenzied, with artillery and rocket fire in the distance. Power at the embassy was intermittent and conditions chaotic. Even though staff worked 12-hour days, they could make little progress in handling the crowds showing up at the embassy and finding people on the ever-longer lists arriving from Canada.

On 8 April, John Baker flew to Hong Kong and flew back to Saigon the next day with Ernest Allen, Deputy Visa Manager in Hong Kong. Allen assisted in evacuating some Canadians from Saigon and flew back to Hong Kong with them. But there was no way to meet the demand for visas of panicked people sponsored by relatives and friends in Canada. As Allen observed, virtually no Vietnamese showed up for the evacuation flight: they could not obtain passports or exit permits, and their own authorities would not allow them to leave.



Charles Rogers, the manager of the Hong Kong visa office came up with a solution. On the one hand, he knew that the Canadian government had committed to resettle any South Vietnamese or Cambodians whose relatives or friends in Canada were willing to sponsor them. On the other hand, with the deteriorating situation in Saigon, connecting the lists of names from Canada with the actual people in South Vietnam was impossible. Knowing that many of the people named on the lists were desperate enough to try to make it to Canada by any means, he gave them a blanket visa approval through the so-called Promise of Visa Letter (PVL). These letters provided a guarantee that their holders would receive a Canadian visa if they could present themselves to any Canadian diplomatic representative, no matter where.

By the second week of April, the Canadian embassy in Saigon could no longer manage the daily lists from Canada, and so they were sent to Hong Kong, where PVLs were created for all the people on the lists—a gargantuan task. The letters were carried by Canadian visa officers Don Cameron, Margaret Tebbutt and Bill Bowden to Saigon, where they were mailed. During a two-week period, Canada's mission in Hong Kong

produced some 3,500 of these letters, covering between 14,000 and 15,000 individuals, all of which were mailed from Saigon even as fighting engulfed the South Vietnamese capital.

Vietnamese refugees in possession of PVLs continued to show up in camps and other locations throughout Southeast Asia decades after the fall of Saigon. It is impossible to estimate how many of these letters were eventually honoured. Undoubtedly, given the chaotic conditions under which they were mailed, the actual number was relatively low. Yet PVLs did serve a real purpose. At a time when it was virtually impossible to contact specific people, they provided hope to both the potential refugees and their sponsors in Canada. But little could be done to rescue large numbers of people directly from Vietnam.

In these conditions, the story of the Canadian “baby flight” stands out. Canadian officials abroad and in Canada, and relatives of those officials acted in tandem to move a group of endangered orphan children and deliver them to adoptive parents in Canada. The cooperation between the Canadian government and the Canadian people in 1979 and 1980 became the trademark characteristic of the Indochinese refugee movement. The baby flight of April 1975 was the first major example of this cooperation, and as such has special importance.

Attempting to rescue the many Indochinese children in NGO-run orphanages, the Americans created “Operation Babylift”, using military aircraft to ferry the children to California or to safety at U.S. bases and to adoption in the U.S. Tragically, the first U.S. transport plane crashed. Some 135 orphans and escorts were killed, but more than 100 children and escorts survived.

Naomi Bronstein, a young Canadian, had brought some orphans from her “Canada House” orphanage in Phnom Penh to Saigon on almost the last U.S. military aircraft leaving Cambodia before the Khmer Rouge marched in. Some of the paperwork to find adoptive parents in Canada had already been completed. Bronstein managed to get places on the U.S. baby flight leaving for the U.S. on 4 April. Meanwhile a Canadian Hercules aircraft arrived in Saigon from Hong Kong to help with the Canadian evacuation effort. After conferring with Ernest Hébert, Canadian chargé d’affaires in Saigon, Bronstein realized that there would be places for her orphans on the Canadian flight and she gave up the places on the U.S. flight. When the American flight crashed, the distraught Bronstein was part of the group that rushed to the wreckage and managed to rescue some of the surviving children. The subsequent Canadian flight from Saigon to Hong Kong carrying Bronstein’s orphans, along with some rescued children from the plane crash and their caretakers, was uneventful. But conditions were very crowded, with many of the babies travelling in cardboard boxes on the floor of the aircraft.

In Hong Kong, High Commissioner Bud Clark asked spouses of Canadian diplomats to help by accompanying the orphans to Canada. The children and their caretakers spent the night at a Hong Kong hotel, while staff at the mission worked feverishly to get their immigration documents ready. The next day, the orphans were on their way to adoptive parents in Canada. They were accompanied, on a memorable flight full of cranky babies and diaper changes, by Elizabeth Heatherington, Sandra Cameron, Jackie Missler, Marilyn Quigley, and Naomi Bronstein and some of her associates. The government recognized Bronstein’s heroic work with the Order of Canada in 1983.



Last Canadian Hercules flight from Tan Son Nhut airport, Saigon, 24 April 1975 (photo: Don Cameron)

In late April 1975, with the defeat of South Vietnam rapidly approaching, the tiny Canadian embassy in Saigon was instructed by Ottawa to evacuate. Chargé d'affaires Ernest Hébert believed it was his responsibility to stay in Saigon as long as possible to ensure the safe evacuation of Canadians, and he performed this difficult task. In the final evacuation flight on 24 April, all remaining Canadians who wished to leave departed from the virtually deserted Tan Son Nhut Airport on a Canadian Forces C-130 aircraft; according to Hébert, 25 April was the last day for a safe evacuation, and so they left at the last possible moment. The exhausted visa officer Don Cameron, who had been ferrying PVLs between Hong Kong and Saigon, was on that final flight.



Refugees catching a bus from a camp in Guam to a charter plane destined for Canada (photo: Scott Heatherington)

Neither the UNHCR nor most Western observers expected the refugee outflow after the fall of Saigon to last, and little was done to find a solution. However, in the case of the refugees evacuated by the U.S. Navy, or leaving Vietnam on their own in small boats, the Americans had little choice. Very rapidly, they had to cope with more than 120,000 refugees, temporarily in the Philippines and in Guam, who had to be moved as quickly as possible to refugee reception centres in military bases on the U.S. mainland. Canada's main effort in resettling approximately 7,000 refugees from Guam, Hong Kong and camps in the U.S., provided welcome assistance to the beleaguered Americans.

A number of factors should be emphasized concerning the 1975-76 Vietnamese refugee movement to Canada. The people who selected and sent the refugees were extremely dedicated Canadian visa officers, immigration doctors, and security officers, ably assisted by communicators, clerical staff and translators (often refugees themselves). They were few in number and accomplished a great deal with limited resources, working long hours under trying conditions. They had a strong sense of adventure and were ready to be on the road at a moment's notice. These factors, and an extraordinary ability to innovate, characterized the Canadians' response throughout.

To conclude, following the fall of Saigon and the establishment of the rule of North Vietnam over the South, Canada's commitment to resettle family members of Canadian residents and Convention refugees (the two categories often overlapped) was rapidly implemented. Canada was one of the very few countries to react immediately and effectively and was second only to the U.S. in terms of the number of refugees accepted. Between 1975 and 1978 Canada admitted 9,000 refugees from Vietnam and Cambodia. The 1975-78 effort was exceeded only by the Hungarian (1956-57: 37,000 refugees accepted), Czech (1968-69: 11,000 refugees accepted) and the later Indochinese movements.

In the years that followed, Canada would make even greater efforts: between 1979 and 1980, with the enthusiastic support of private Canadian sponsors, Canada absorbed 60,000 additional Indochinese refugees. By the time the movement ended in the mid-1990s, close to 150,000 new residents had been added to Canada's population. The Indochinese refugee movement was a success in part because of the dedication of Canadian officers in the field and in Canada and because Canada's governance system at the time permitted them great latitude in performing their work.

1. (Fox Butterfield, *Reporter's Notebook: Six Days in the Evacuation from Saigon*, New York Times (Archive) 5/5/1975)
2. (9/04/75 Memo to Minister: Report from the Canadian Embassy Wash DC, LAC RG 76 – vol.991 File 5850 3-5-641 vol. 1)

Living on Adrenalin

Kurt F. Jensen

Canadian Immigration foreign service officers in Southeast Asia were tasked with saving a large number of Indochinese refugees. Their humanitarian effort was conducted under conditions that were often incomprehensibly difficult. Here are a few of the stories that will appear in a book which the Canadian Immigration Historical Society is preparing for publication later this year.

The Fall of Saigon

John Baker, head of Immigration in Singapore, was in Saigon during the anxious final days. He recalls “everyone huddling around the communicator as ‘important’ telexes arrived. One telex asked the mission for an inventory of everything in the embassy, including the attached residence. The communicator looked up at the chargé d’affaires, seeking a comment. The reply was, ‘Tell them to f... off’, which was duly sent. Several years later, I ran into John Hadwen, then Director General of Consular Affairs, who had been sitting in the communications centre at the Department of External Affairs when the message arrived. Not only did he think it was hilarious but, in the circumstances, most appropriate.”

The Operation

The officers quickly recognized the severity of the humanitarian crisis in Southeast Asia and became imbued with the need to help as many people as possible. Marius Grinius (based in Thailand) recalls that, “in many respects selecting refugees for Canada was relatively easy. The key was not to think too much about the yes/no life-changing decisions that you had to make 30 or 40 times a day. Otherwise you risked being overwhelmed. The enormous press of numbers ensured that one did not dwell on any philosophical or existential aspects. The criteria for acceptance were simple. By the end of the interview you decided whether the family, and it usually was a family, sitting in front of you, could establish itself in Canada. An ideal scenario was a family unit composed of two able-bodied parents, with at least grade-school education, a trade, and perhaps speaking French or English, one or two single siblings who could contribute to the family as wage-earners, and grandparents who could look after the children while the parents were working. A tough, energetic grandmother and matriarch was always welcome. The family dynamics and the parents’ willingness to work at any job to start a new life in Canada invariably ended with a positive decision. Sometimes, however, as colleague Bill Sheppit put it, ‘you made your decision based on the gleam in a child’s eye’”.

Scott Mullin (based in Hong Kong) remembers that, “we were selecting people ‘who, in the opinion of the visa officer, will successfully establish in Canada...’ That flexibility allowed me to take such cases as an elderly man married to identical twin sisters. He had a son in the U.S., but the Americans would not take him, his ‘wives’ and his three other sons and their families, because of the second wife. Once I had established which was the elder of the sisters, the younger wife simply became his wife’s sister and the family was accepted.”

Tove Bording and Bill Sheppit were the selection team in Singapore responsible for Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia shortly after the fall of Saigon. The Singapore workload was insurmountable, and one or the other team member was always away at a refugee camp. Bill Sheppit recalls that “going to the refugee camps was always a challenge. On one trip, my rental car was forced off the road by a timber truck. My car did a 360° turn and then rolled over. Fifty feet off the road by the time the car stopped, I got out with no bones broken but with glass in my hair, a little bloody and covered in red mud, with office files all over the inside of the car from my opened suitcase. I was picked up by an intercity taxi and driven back to Singapore. When I walked into the office with the suitcase, covered in mud and blood, Tove, reflecting on my recent annual appraisal, suggested that I was obviously trying for an outstanding appraisal!”

Tove Bording recalls one of her early camp visits. “Khlung Yai [in Thailand] was a tiny fishing village with no place for us to stay. It was monsoon season, and the road was terrible. I thought it was under construction since we drove in and out of huge excavations. As we could not stay in Khlung Yai, we had to go back to Trat each night and return the following morning, making four trips over that road. It was only after I returned to Singapore that I learned that the road wasn’t under construction and that its rough condition was due to the road being mined, with a mine sweeper sent over the road twice a day!”

The stories from the refugees were harrowing. Bill Sheppit recalls his last interview in Mai Rut [in Thailand] on the Cambodian border. “I spoke with a man who had walked from Phnom Penh starting with 12 in his family. They were stopped by the Khmer Rouge and had some casualties. Two of the women were later murdered. Three of the family made it to the Thai border, only to encounter a mine field where two of them were blown up. The man I met was the only one in the group to survive.”

Tove Bording explains that, “critical in our deliberations was the humanitarian side. You made decisions which were ‘right’ and didn’t worry about it. I encountered four cousins who insisted that they would only go if all were accepted. Two of them had good employment prospects. They were going to Manitoba. I talked them into going ahead to get established before the next two cousins arrived. I had committed to taking the second two, one of whom, I think, was only 17. Facing the grim realities in the camps, you didn’t ask headquarters: you did the right thing and sorted it out with headquarters later. When I was ready to issue visas to the second two cousins, we received a message from headquarters saying not to take them because Winnipeg had said something. I sent them anyway because we had made a commitment to help.”



Malaysian fishing boats used to ferry visa officers, their files and overnight luggage on the four-hour trip to the refugee camp at Pulau Bidong – “slow, smelly, noisy and uncomfortable” (photo and quote: Don Cameron)

The Camps and the Refugees

David Ritchie (based in Singapore and responsible for Malaysia and Indonesia) remembers his days in the camps, with their unique and enduring smells. “At night, we sometimes slept on the same wooden tables at which we interviewed, rather than face the rough sea journeys back to the mainland. On one such occasion, I lucked into the improved accommodation in the camp’s wooden hospital. I was fortunate to get an upper bunk to avoid the rat traffic which continued all night long.”

An accurate figure of the number who left Vietnam but never arrived in a country of first asylum will never be known, but it is certainly many, many thousands. Don Cameron (based in Singapore and responsible for Malaysia and Indonesia) remembers that, “apart from the weather, the principal threat was attack by pirates. At the very least, a pirate attack resulted in theft of all of the refugees’ gold and valuables. In many cases the pirates wounded, killed and threw overboard refugees who attempted to resist and raped many of the girls and women. In some cases, rape victims were thrown overboard to drown and in others they were taken by the pirates to brothels on shore. Arriving in one camp, I was approached by the camp leader, the UNHCR representative and a Red Cross doctor asking me to help remove from the camp as soon as possible several young women who had recently arrived and who had been repeatedly raped during a pirate attack. The doctor told me that the only reason they were alive was that their boat arrived directly at the camp, where immediate medical attention was available. We got them to Canada quickly, and they wrote after they arrived that they were doing well and were under the sponsorship of a supportive religious community.”

Every officer who served in Southeast Asia has similar stories of adapting the system to help those in need. Don Cameron also recalls “the arrival of a boat in a port on the east coast of Malaysia. It had been spotted at sea by the Malaysian police and escorted to the dock. The boat was vastly overloaded, with standing room only. It had successfully crossed the Gulf of Thailand only because the weather was calm. As the boat was emptied, the police discovered a young woman who looked to me to be dead. Bloody rags were tied around the stump of one of her arms; a flywheel from the boat’s engine had torn the arm off two days before. She was alive but unconscious. I told the UNHCR official at the scene that the young woman was accepted for

resettlement in Canada. By chance I was at the Kuala Lumpur airport when she left for Canada and recognized her because of the missing limb.”

Adventures in Selection

Murray Oppertshauser’s last interviews in Thailand were “in a Hmong hill tribe camp in the middle of nowhere in Northern Thailand. One interview was different. I was confronted with the impossible situation of a Hmong man with two wives and a multitude of children. This was a culturally acceptable familial relationship in Hmong society, but it hardly accorded with Canadian norms or laws. Having to make a decision in what appeared to be an otherwise nice and acceptable family unit, I advised the family to go outside to discuss which one of the wives would become the widow of the principal applicant’s ‘dead brother’. Moment later, a decision was made and the extended family was accepted for Canada.”

Extraordinary management skills were in good supply and displayed throughout the Indochinese refugee crisis. Marius Grinius described Murray Oppertshauser as “one of the best leaders that I had the privilege to serve, and I include my 12 years of military service”. Less than a year after arriving in Bangkok with resources to process 20 families a month, Oppertshauser had built an operation that moved a mixed clientele of more than 18,000 Vietnamese, Laotian and Cambodian refugees to Canada on 52 Charter flights.

Ian Hamilton (based in Singapore and responsible for Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand) is remembered and admired to this day for his compassionate efficiency in managing the evacuation of refugees from the [Hai Hong](#). His successor, Al Lukie (based in Singapore and responsible for Malaysia and Indonesia), drove a redeployment of Canadian and international resources to service the thousands of refugees stranded in Indonesia and managed twin airlifts out of Singapore (26 flights) and Kuala Lumpur (56 flights) that brought more than 26,000 refugees to Canada. Gerry Campbell, a veteran of the Uganda operation, returned to Ottawa after temporary duty in Singapore and was the catalyst for a revolutionary overhaul of the processing system that saved thousands of hours of work. He subsequently led a team in Hong Kong which moved more than 12,000 refugees on 45 charter flights.



L to R: David Ritchie, John McEachern, and then-RCMP corporal Ben Soave, in front of a helicopter chartered by the UNHCR to ferry Singapore-based visa officers to the Anambas Islands in Indonesia (photo: Don Cameron)

David Ritchie recalls other challenges. “On the first of my many trips to the huge, purpose-built camp at Galang [in Indonesia], a UNHCR representative convinced us to interview a small number of refugees who had been left behind in an abandoned camp somewhere in Riau province. We travelled by boat and then by a 4x4 vehicle deep into uncut tropical forest. At our destination, waist-high grass and creepers had reclaimed most of the old camp. It was now home to just a hundred or so poor souls who were being nursed by the Indonesian Red Crescent for a variety of infectious diseases that prevented them from being moved. We used machetes on the entire open air shelter that was to act as our interviewing area. Dust and flies and perspiration filled the equatorial air. None of us dared wipe the sweat from eyes, lips or nose all day long, since most of the applicants were suffering from highly contagious conjunctivitis. Somehow, we all escaped without succumbing to pink eye.”

Unconventional selection protocols were occasionally necessary to meet Canadian goals. David Ritchie recalls the challenges of selecting unaccompanied minors. “In combing the camps for unaccompanied minors, I discovered that there were very few children who were alone. I did find several hundred unaccompanied young males, who might or might not have been under the age of sixteen. These teens were there as a result of the efforts made by many Vietnamese families to avoid the forced military conscription of their sons. Out of

desperation, many poor families saved enough money to place a son on an escaping boat. In the camps, the UNHCR had trouble figuring out the actual ages of these kids. I encountered the same difficulties.

“My solution was to employ several former Saigon bar girls as my volunteer refugee clerks and interpreters. They were delightful women who had a shrewd eye and ear for anyone of the opposite gender. I was entertained by their easy way with [American] GI English. Most importantly, I found these women’s intuitive knowledge of young males invaluable in assessing the actual physical and psychological age of these young draft dodgers. The kids’ reaction to the very attractive women sitting on either side of me told me a lot about their age of development, maturity and worldliness. I managed to find several dozen young men who were indeed alone in the camps and truly in need of a foster family’s love and protection.”

The Southeast Asian operation eventually involved a fleet of charter aircraft ferrying hundreds of refugees to Canada every week. One particular airline constantly emerges in the stories of the officers serving in the region. Murray Oppertshauser remembers that “Wardair was the most professional airline we used. On its first flight to Thailand, it brought an engine for a 747 to park with the Thai airline service staff. That engine went home on the last flight out. If something had happened to one of their engines along the way, then they had another one ready. CP Air and Air Canada were good, but not as professional as Wardair. Max Ward, head of Wardair, loved the refugee movement and took the project under his wing. He met the first two or three incoming charter flights in Edmonton, boarding the airplanes before anybody else to check on the passengers. On Wardair, the refugees were served their food on china dishes. The other airlines gave them plastic plates. Max Ward said ‘They’re paying customers, they get treated like anybody else,’ and so they received full service, including china and cutlery on their flights.”



In front of the interviewing hut on Guam. Back row L to R: U.S. Marine guard, Mel Swenson and Charles Rogers; Front row centre: Joyce Cavanagh Wood and Rebecca Wong, with two locally engaged staff on either side (photo: Scott Heatherington)

The stories of this intrepid group would not be complete without an encounter related by Colleen Cupples (based in Hong Kong), who supervised the embarkation of a charter flight in Hong Kong. She spotted a tiny Vietnamese girl in the line carrying a bucket almost as big as she was. Colleen approached the child and gently asked what she was carrying. The child took the lid off the bucket. It contained water. Here is what she said, “When we left Vietnam, we were all very thirsty. Now I am going to Canada. I don’t know how far away it is, but it is certainly a long journey, and I am never going to be thirsty again.”

Donald Milburn and the Matching Centre

Charlene Elgee and Mike Molloy

We are sad to report the passing of Don Milburn, who died on 9 November 2014 at the age of 94. Don was one of the last of the postwar immigration officers. He was a founding member of our society, and along with his late wife, Dot (See Bulletin 68, September 2013) has often figured in the pages of the bulletin over the years. He had a long and eventful career and played a pivotal role in the Indochinese refugee movement we are marking with this special edition.

Don Milburn was born in Faulkland in the county of Somerset, England, on 26 September 1920. When Don was eight years old, his father answered a newspaper advertisement by the Hudson’s Bay Company for a 160-

acre farm in western Canada. The family had three years to establish themselves. Then they had to return one third of the income from the crop to the Hudson's Bay Company for seven years, after which the farm would become theirs. The Milburn family took the train to Liverpool; a steamship (SS *Montrose*, leaving 22 May 1929) to Halifax, and a much longer train ride across Canada to Vermilion, Alberta.. When war broke out in 1939, Don enlisted in the Loyal Edmonton Regiment and sailed with the First Canadian Division to the U.K. in December on the [MV Batory](#) (See Bulletin 70, May 2014). In 1944, he graduated from the Royal Military Academy in Sandhurst with the rank of lieutenant and served overseas until 1946.

The postwar period saw the hiring of many ex-servicemen as immigration officers, and Don Milburn was among them. He started his career in a temporary Immigration job in the summer of 1947 at Kingsgate, B.C., with the Department of Mines and Resources. By the winter of 1948, there was a permanent spot for Don, complete with the navy blue uniform and a \$3,000 salary. The year 1950 brought with it new opportunities, and Don was recruited into the Overseas Immigration Service. Training included several months of travel across the country, getting to know the geography, the industries, and the working and living conditions in every part of Canada. As Don put it, they needed to know "how the immigration service could best help it [Canada] continue to grow by providing the right people".

The next four years (the usual length of a rotation for Immigration officers at that time) were spent in Rotterdam, where Don learned to speak Dutch. Then it was back to Canada for more cross-country travel and a second posting, this time in The Hague with a brief stint in Copenhagen. In the latter half of the 1950s, with the formalizing of the Foreign Service Officer category in the federal public service, university degrees were becoming mandatory with exceptions made for serving officers who could pass the foreign service officers' exam. For Don, this meant a trip to the Paris office, a passing mark in the exam, and a promotion and pay rise (now all the way up to \$5,000). It was also a time when Canada was opening offices all over Europe, giving rising stars in the Immigration service more opportunities. For Don, this meant a position as a publicity officer in Glasgow in the spring of 1957; six months later, the new office in Leeds welcomed him and was his home until 1959.

Canada beckoned and the next three years were spent in Ottawa with the Department of Citizenship and Immigration, a posting that lasted until 1962, when Don returned to the U.K., for four years in London. Another coast-to-coast tour preceded a job in the Canadian consulate in New York City in 1966, where Don found himself as much ambassador for Canada's centennial year celebrations as immigration officer.

In 1969, Don was posted to New Delhi, where his overseas career ended with an injury incurred, as Don said, "by trying to steal third base" in a recreational softball game. Complications brought Don back to headquarters in Ottawa in early 1970. Here he spent the rest of his career, working with Policy, Selection, Ministerial Correspondence, and finally Settlement.



Don Milburn at far right with members of the matching centre (L to R): Philomène Caron, Charles Spencer, Susan McKale, Jim Coles and Julie Sundstrom (photo: CEIC's *Panorama* circa 1980)

In the spring of 1979, the number of people fleeing Vietnam in small, overcrowded boats escalated, setting off international repercussions as neighbouring countries refused entry to the refugees, resulting in thousands of fatalities. At the same time, Canadians began to organize themselves to sponsor the refugees.

It quickly became clear that the beleaguered visa offices in Hong Kong, Singapore and Bangkok were unable to cope with both processing the refugees and matching them up with sponsors. As a result, the decision was taken to create

a matching centre to assign the refugees who were beginning to arrive in Canada to waiting sponsors. Don was asked to set up, design and staff the centre, which soon had a staff of eight. In July, the government announced that Canada would accept an unprecedented 50,000 refugees by the end of 1980. Don managed a rapid transformation and computerization of the matching system, and by October 1979, it was capable of matching approximately 4,000 incoming refugees with sponsors each month.

From the start of this unprecedented resettlement operation, it was clear that, rightly or wrongly, success would be judged by how quickly and efficiently the 7,500 sponsoring groups received their refugees. Of the 60,049 refugees who arrived in Canada by December 1980, 32,281 (53 per cent) went to private sponsors. The vast majority found those sponsors thanks to the hard work and dedication of Don and his matchers and their counterparts in the Immigration department's regional offices and Canada Immigration Centres across the country. It was for Don a "challenging but very satisfying year". After serving as acting director of the Settlement branch, Don Milburn retired in 1981.

Don is survived by his sons, John and David, his grandson Ian, and his great-grandsons Denis and Matthew.

Remembering the Indochinese Refugee Movement

Mike Molloy

The refugees and the several hundred thousand ordinary Canadians who welcomed them and helped them to adjust to life in Canada are, of course, the main elements of this story.

What is much less known is the story of how the refugees got here. That is the story of, how, in 1979 and 1980, 20 or so young Canadian visa officers, operating in remote, hot, humid, smelly, hard-to-reach camps in Brunei, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Macau, Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines identified, interviewed, selected, processed and transported 60,000 refugees to Canada on 181 charter flights with never a seat left empty. It is the story of the two remarkable reception centres that the Department of National Defence and the Canada Employment and Immigration Commission (CEIC) organized on military bases in Edmonton and Montreal to receive, orient and document the refugees and give them a few days' rest after their arrival on Canadian soil. It is the story of how a little group of clerks, supported by a stove-sized computer and a system inspired by the Berlin Airlift, matched 40,000 incoming refugees with 7,600 sponsors. And finally, it is the story of how Employment and Immigration staffers working in their communities played a critical role in coordinating the sponsorship movement and dealt with the many problems that arose after the refugees arrived in Canada.

The Book

Three years ago, with the 40th anniversary of the fall of Saigon approaching on 30 April 2015, a number of those young Immigration, Employment and visa officers, now in their 60s and 70s, decided it was time to tell that third part of the story under the auspices of the Canadian Immigration Historical Society. All but three chapters of a 22-chapter book are completed. Drawing on close to 1,000 documents from Library and Archives Canada and several hundred from the UNHCR Archives in Geneva, the CIHS writing team of Peter Duschinsky, Kurt F. Jensen, Mike Molloy and Robert Shalka, have teased out the story of the upheavals in Southeast Asia between 1975 and 1980, describing and analysing the events, the policy considerations, the political and bureaucratic decisions, and the operational innovations that made it possible to move so many people from so far away so quickly to Canada.

The actual story of how it was really done is told first hand in the words of more than 40 former CEIC, RCMP and National Health and Welfare employees, one stalwart foreign service wife and a doughty Scottish sea captain. These stories, sometimes shocking, sometimes funny, and always quietly inspiring, make up two thirds of the book tentatively titled *Running on Empty: The Canada Employment and Immigration Commission and the Indochinese Refugee Movement 1975-1980*. It should be published later this year. Some examples of what it was really like can be found in this bulletin's article by Kurt F. Jensen.

The Conference

When York University's Centre for Refugee Studies (CRS) heard about the CIHS book project, it suggested that the two organizations co-host a [conference on the Indochinese movement](#). The CRS grew out of an Indochinese refugee documentation project established by Operation Lifeline, and 2013 would mark its 25th anniversary. The conference was designed under the title "The Indochinese Refugee Program 1975 to 1980 and the Launch of Canada's Private Refugee Sponsorship Program". The Sponsorship Agreement Holders' Association joined the effort, and in November 2013 the event, funded by Citizenship and Immigration Canada's Multicultural Branch, was launched with a one-day workshop that examined the current state of Canada's private refugee sponsorship program.

The conference, held between 21 and 23 November 2013, heard no academic papers. Instead it received first-hand accounts and testimony from three refugee panels, plus panels made up of former visa officers and other federal, provincial and municipal officials, sponsors, community organizers, and media representatives. Keynote speakers included Udo Janz, Director of UNHCR's New York office, and Senator, the honourable Thanh Hai Ngo.

The refugee panels, each featuring representatives of the Vietnamese, Sino-Vietnamese, Laotian and Cambodian communities, were particularly gripping. The panel members recounted their experiences in becoming refugees and escaping to neighbouring countries. The stories about dangerous voyages at sea or treks through jungles, pirate attacks, hunger, thirst, privation and the horror of losing children along the way were received by the more than 100 participants in shocked silence. The panel on first contact between newly arrived refugees and their sponsors demonstrated that in most cases, with humour and patience, the sponsorship program worked well. The conference also heard a sobering account of what could happen when a sponsoring group was not up to the task. The final refugee panel had the former refugees talk about their lives in Canada since arrival, and their stories demonstrated time and again the importance of family, hard work and the resilience of the human spirit.

Happily, funding permitted the conference proceedings to be recorded on video tape along with 21 hour-long interviews with selected conference participants. The conference web site also includes a 30-minute documentary and a series of shorter thematic documentaries compiled from the proceedings.

Looking Forward

In January 2014 a post-conference workshop came up with an ambitious program aimed at stimulating further research and making information on the Canadian experience with the Indochinese refugees more widely available. The first priority was to establish a presence on the Internet with a [hub site](#) and cluster of specialized satellite sites. As mentioned above, the proceedings of the entire [conference](#) are online. Funding from CIC's Multiculturalism Branch and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council has allowed work to begin on a docudrama based on the experiences of one of the conference participants.

Educational Outreach: The Centre for Refugee Studies has hired a PhD student to develop materials for use in high schools focusing on the Indochinese refugees and how Canadians assisted them. The objective is to have the first set of materials on line before 30 April 2015.

Online Archive: Consultations are under way with York University Library to create an online archive of documents and other materials relating to the Indochinese refugee movement and the Canadian response. The Canadian Immigration Historical Society's large collection of federal government and UNHCR documents, and other materials relevant to the Indochinese movement, will constitute the nucleus of the new archive. The archive will be a unique resource for students, researchers and members of Canada's Indochinese community. The CIHS remains very interested in collecting documents and memorabilia on the Indochinese refugee movement.

Oral History: As the original population of Indochinese refugees ages, the CIHS-CRS partnership is making plans for a workshop in the fall of 2015 that will bring together representatives of institutions that collect immigrant and refugee oral histories. The objective is to collect a minimum of 100 Indochinese refugee oral

histories for the online archive that will be housed at York University's library and to encourage institutions across Canada to undertake similar activities that will preserve the firsthand accounts of the refugees who came to Canada, as well as the experiences of sponsors, host families and others.

New Publications: Since its inception, the Centre for Refugee Studies has published a journal called [Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees](#) dedicated to the scholarly exploration of a wide range of issues related to forced displacement. A [Call for Papers](#) elicits ideas for papers relating to the Indochinese refugee movement and the Canadian reaction. These will be compiled into a special edition of *Refuge* to be issued before the end of 2015. There are also plans for an edited volume on the Indochinese refugee movement in Canada, examining aspects of the largest resettlement program in this country's history not covered in CIHS's book.

Journey to Freedom Day Act: As we go to press, [Bill S-219](#) is making its way through parliament to commemorate the exodus of Vietnamese refugees and their acceptance in Canada after the fall of Saigon and the end of the Vietnam War.

Post Script:

Canada's involvement with the Indochinese refugees did not of course end with the conclusion of the big movement of 1979-80. Citizenship and Immigration Canada statistics indicate that 54,000 Indochinese refugees were admitted to Canada between 1981 and 1997, when the movement finally ended. Another 10,000 Vietnamese came to Canada directly from Vietnam under the Family Reunification Program between 1980 and 1986. There have been at least two subsequent small movements of Vietnamese stranded in various countries brought to Canada under ministerial direction and paid for by the Canadian Vietnamese community.

These later phases of the movement involved a number of interesting developments that merit further study. These include programs to deter piracy and two international initiatives under the [UNHCR \(RASRO and Disero\)](#) that encourage ships' captains to rescue boat people in distress by guaranteeing their resettlement once they have disembarked. Later, when the international community perceived a shift in the nature of those departing Vietnam, Canada also participated in UNHCR-chaired negotiations involving Vietnam, the asylum countries of Southeast Asia, and the resettlement countries to create the Comprehensive Plan of Action. Under this plan, genuine refugees were identified and offered resettlement while economic migrants were returned to Vietnam under UN supervision and monitoring.



L to R: President Michael Molloy, Senator Thanh Hai Ngo and Can D. Le

CIHS has launched a special website on the [Indochinese refugee movement](#). The site features photos, historical documents about the movement and links to other websites - all to help capture this significant movement.

A Chronology of the Indochinese Refugee Movement 1975-80

Abbreviations:

E&I - Employment and Immigration Canada (Manpower and Immigration's successor)

DND - The Department of National Defence

UNHCR - The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

1975

- Khmer Rouge and Pathet Lao seize Phnom Penh and Vientiane. Saigon falls to Communist forces on 30 April. Some 130,000 people flee from South Vietnam and are rescued by the U.S. Navy.
- April: The Canadian visa office in Hong Kong sends Promise of Visa letters to 3,500 families (approximately 15,000 persons) in Vietnam sponsored by relatives in Canada.
- 6 April: Indochinese orphans start to arrive in Canada.
- 24 April: Canadian staff at the embassy in Saigon are evacuated.
- 1 May: E&I Minister Robert Andras announces that Canada will accept 3,000 Vietnamese and Kampuchean refugees beyond those sponsored by relatives: 2,000 from U.S. refugee centres and 1,000 from other countries.
- 7-23 May: A Canadian team arrives in Guam and processes 1,400 Vietnamese refugees evacuated by the U.S. military. Subsequently Canadian officials from Ottawa and from consulates in Los Angeles and New Orleans process thousands more from military bases in the continental U.S.
- May-June: People start fleeing Vietnam in small boats, beginning the "boat people" phenomenon.

1976

- October: The remaining 180 places from the 3,000 Indochinese target of May 1975 are applied to boat people.
- December: Since May 1975, 6,500 Indochinese have arrived in Canada—4,200 sponsored by relatives and 2,300 unsponsored.
- An estimated 5,619 boat people arrive in Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Hong Kong and the Philippines.

1977

- August: Cabinet authorizes resettlement of another 450 "small boat escapees" (SBE).
- December: Heavy fighting between Vietnam and Cambodia is preceded by the expulsion from Kampuchea of large numbers of ethnic Vietnamese.
- An estimated 21,276 boat people arrive in Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Hong Kong, the Philippines, Brunei and Macau.

1978

- 13 January: Canada announces that it will accept 50 SBE families a month.
- E&I Minister Bud Cullen approves the Private Refugee Sponsorship Program.
- March: Hanoi nationalizes the remaining, mainly ethnic Chinese, private businesses.
- July: The Canadian government launches the [Private Refugee Sponsorship Program](#) and releases the E&I pamphlet "Sponsoring Refugees: Facts for Canadian Groups and Organizations".

- September: *The Southern Cross*, a freighter carrying 1,200 refugees, beaches on an Indonesian island. E&I Singapore accepts refugees with links to Canada.
- October: Detailed instructions for selecting Indochinese refugees stress the need to keep extended families together.
- 11 November: Two E&I officers arrive in Bangkok to process refugees in Thailand.
- November: The [Hai Hong](#), a freighter carrying 2,500 refugees (mostly ethnic Chinese), arrives off Malaysia. E&I Minister Bud Cullen announces that Canada will accept 604 of the refugees. The story raises Canadian awareness of the Indochinese refugee problem.
- December: Vietnam invades Cambodia.
- 7 December: The [Indochinese Designated Class Regulations](#) simplify selection rules.
- 11-12 December: A UNHCR-led consultation in Geneva highlights the growing number of Indochinese refugees in Southeast Asia and the need for more resettlement opportunities.
- 20 December: Cabinet decides that 5,000 Indochinese will be admitted under Canada's first Annual Refugee Plan. Refugee charter flights begin.
- Almost 106,500 boat people arrive in Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Hong Kong, the Philippines, Brunei and Macau.
- Between 1975 and 1978, 9,060 Indochinese refugees are resettled in Canada.

1979

- March: The Mennonite Central Committee signs a Refugee Sponsorship Master Agreement with E&I. Agreements with other faith communities and organizations quickly follow.
- April to May: Some 80,000 Cambodians are displaced towards the Thai border as a result of fighting between the Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese army.
- April to June: Boat arrivals increase dramatically in countries surrounding the South China Sea: April—26,602; May—51,139; and June—56,941.
- May: A matching centre is established in Ottawa to match incoming refugees with sponsors.
- 22 May: A Conservative government replaces the Liberals.
- June: The government increases the target for Indochinese refugees from 5,000 to 8,000 and asks the voluntary sector to sponsor an additional 4,000.
- 4 June: Ron Atkey becomes Minister of E&I and Flora MacDonald becomes Secretary of State for External Affairs. Both engage immediately on the Indochinese refugee file.
- 28 June: Some 388 private groups respond, sponsoring 1,604 refugees.
- Late June: Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines and Singapore announce that they have "reached the limit of their endurance and [will] not accept any new arrivals".
- July: Project 4000 in Ottawa, Operation Lifeline in Toronto, and the Vancouver Task Force, among many others, promote group sponsorships across Canada.
- July 18: Ministers Flora MacDonald and Ron Atkey announce Canada will resettle 50,000 Indochinese by the end of 1980. The 50,000 will include the 8,000 announced in June, 21,000 sponsored by private groups matched by 21,000 to be resettled by the government.
- Some 747 groups sponsor 3,800 refugees.
- 20-21 July: The UN Secretary General calls an emergency conference in Geneva.
- This conference concludes with a three-way international understanding:
 - ASEAN countries will continue to provide temporary asylum;
 - Vietnam will try to promote orderly departures and prevent illegal departures; and

- Western countries will accelerate the rate of third-country resettlement. Canada announces it will accept 50,000 refugees. This includes the 8,000 announced in June plus 21,000 sponsored privately, matched by 21,000 government-assisted refugees.
- The government charters 76 flights to transport 15,800 refugees by the end of the year
- July to August: 11 DND flights transport more than 2,000 refugees from Hong Kong.
- August: Staging areas are established to receive refugee charter flights at Canadian Forces bases Longue Pointe (Montreal) and Greisbach Barracks (Edmonton).
- 8 and 14 August: The first charter flights arrive in Montreal and Edmonton respectively.
- October: The presence of 800,000 starving Cambodians on the Thai border creates a new humanitarian crisis.
- December: Ministers Atkey and MacDonald announce that the government will no longer match each privately sponsored refugee with a government-assisted refugee; the refugee target will remain at 50,000; the \$15 million in savings will be applied to Cambodian relief. The announcement is met with disapproval from sponsors.
- A total of 23,583 refugees have arrived in Canada: 8,211 sponsored privately; 615 sponsored by family; and 10,043 sponsored by the government. Some 5,456 private groups have applied to sponsor 29,269 refugees, far surpassing the government's call for 21,000.

1980

- February: \$1.3 million is allocated to the administrative costs of organizations coordinating sponsorship activities.
- 16 February: A Liberal government replaces the Conservatives.
- 2 April: E&I Minister Lloyd Axworthy announces that 10,000 additional government-assisted refugees will be accepted by the end of 1980, bringing the total to 60,000.
- 8 December: Flight #181 arrives in Longue Pointe, Quebec from Bangkok, carrying the last of Canada's 60,049 refugees. Of these, 32,281 (53.8 per cent) are privately sponsored; 1,790 (3 per cent) are sponsored by relatives; and 25,978 (43.2 per cent) are assisted by the government.

Source of statistics:

Employment and Immigration Canada: The Indochinese Refugees: the Canadian Response, 1979 and 1980 (1981, Department of Supply and Services)

Slightly different versions of the articles printed in this special bulletin appear in the April edition of "Bout de Papier", issued by the Professional Association of Foreign Service Officers.

<p>The Canadian Immigration Historical Society (www.CIHS-SHIC.ca) is a non-profit corporation registered as a charitable organization under the Income Tax Act.</p>	<p>Goals: -To support, encourage and promote research into the history of Canadian immigration and to foster the collection and dissemination of that history, and -To stimulate interest in and further the appreciation and understanding of the influence of immigration on Canada's development and position in the world.</p>	<p>President - Michael J. Molloy; Vice-President - Anne Arnott; Treasurer - Raph Girard; Secretary - Gail Devlin; Editor - Valerie de Montigny; Board members: J.B. "Joe" Bissett, Brian Casey, Roy Christensen, Hector Cowan, Peter Duschinsky, Charlene Elgee, Kurt Jensen, Gerry Maffre (Communications), Ian Rankin and Gerry Van Kessel CIC Representative – Susan Burrows</p>
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