

The Vietnamese “Boat People” on Thorney Island

by John Pointon

In the late 1970s the refugee exodus from Vietnam increasingly hit the headlines, an issue that impacted upon the UK when British freighters picked up boatloads of refugees at sea which resulted in their asylum here.

We talk of “Boat People” but some clarification is needed. Land routes out of Vietnam were blocked by conflict and the only way out was by sea. Those from the south set out across the open seas facing the real threats of storms and pirate attack. Their only real hope of salvation was to be picked up by a passing cargo ship. On the other hand, those from the north faced the relatively easy journey along the coast of China, being resupplied along the way until they reached the British colony of Hong Kong.

By 1980, Hong Kong held 80,000 refugees in makeshift accommodation and it was from there that the government finally accepted 10,000 into the UK. Thus, the majority of refugees who passed through Thorney Island were from the north of Vietnam and were ethnically Chinese with little exposure to English and western matters. Of course freighters did pick up southerners and they did come through Thorney. They were ethnically Vietnamese and having lived alongside the Americans had experience of English and a western way of life.

So, it was in about August 1979 that we learned that the ex-RAF station Thorney Island was to house 500 Vietnamese “Boat People”.

For a few months I had been working at Sopley in Hampshire, where there were 600 refugees from the freighter *Sibonga*. What had been intended to be a six month project for them turned into a rolling programme when the new Thatcher government accepted the 10,000 refugees. With the



Awaiting rescue
Photo: The Independent

subsequent announcement of Thorney Island, I was 'poached' by West Sussex LEA to set up the secondary and adult education provision there and my wife Mandy was appointed general assistant. Time was very short and we had barely a month to get staff recruited and ourselves organised. In fact, Thorney Education opened for business on 22nd October and by then refugees were already on site and waiting for us.

Thorney Island was a large air station and so only the area of West Thorney was used; essentially, the Officers Mess and surrounding houses. The establishment was administered by the British Council for Aid to Refugees (BCAR) led by Maj. Basil Arrowsmith and they managed the reception, accommodation, catering and resettlement, all the while providing 24 hour welfare cover. Their admin department was set up in the old Station Commander's house and included the functions of resettlement and job seeking.

With regard to accommodation, initially all the refugees lived in the main block and the

west wing of the Officers Mess but when the camp was expanded the following year, some houses opposite were pulled into use. In Hong Kong each family was allocated a bare wooden bunk but here a family was housed in a single room kitted out with comfortable bunks and bedding. Incidentally, when it was equipped, some of the supplies (sheets, blankets etc.) that appeared had been in store since pre- Second World War.

BCAR staff had rooms in the other senior officers' houses but Maj. Arrowsmith lived in The Glebe. A little later, houses in Vulcan Road were made available for teachers and, after the expansion, also in Hornet Road.

The full-time education and health provision was supplied by West Sussex County Council and funded by the Home Office. One of the houses was equipped as a Health Centre. The County reopened the Primary School and an Education Centre for secondary age children and adults was established in the west wing (now demolished) of the Officers Mess.

What had been junior officers' quarters in the Mess, essentially large single bedrooms, became classrooms. It was a tight fit but fortunately the people's needs were not just for 'chalk and talk'; there were practical things the refugees needed to know and to do. Classes were often taken out and about, visiting places such as supermarkets and post offices.

Many other organisations came to help the refugees either on a voluntary basis or as part of their community responsibilities. The local police would come in and give lectures on safety and the laws of the land, and help with any issue which would arise from having a community of people living under one roof in unfamiliar circumstances. The DSS would come in to advise and prepare people for claiming benefit once in their own home. The job centre would also help individuals to find work once they knew where home was going to be. Religious groups would offer counselling and support and much of the

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The Vietnamese "Boat People" continued

organisation of these visitors came under the auspices of the general assistant.

As I say, time was very short and an early admin problem was that the Centre was always open. We had to staff for a full 50 week year but of course teachers' contracts gave normal leave entitlements. Very quickly we had to work out processes to enable these issues to be resolved. Fortunately, the refugees came to our aid. Notionally, they were to be with us for three months before resettlement but of course as families left other groups would arrive. Because of this, classes were therefore constantly being amended or dissolved and reformed and it became easier for teachers to take time out without disrupting work.

Clearly, we were doing something right, for, in 1980, the camp capacity was increased making it the largest in the country. In the same year, Thames Television made a TV programme about Thorney Island introduced by Sandy Gall. (I think a copy maybe available from the British Film Institute.)

The whole point of the project was to resettle the refugees into UK society. Most refugees were distributed to different parts of the country, wherever local authorities could provide housing. However, most areas were devoid of a Vietnamese community in which individuals could find personal support and there was a natural gravitation towards London. Chinatown now sports many successful Vietnamese restaurants.

Then, in 1981, came the time to close the camp. No more refugees were received and as resettlement continued so numbers fell. Of course it was irregular and in Education we tried to phase staffing reductions in line, erring where necessary towards over-staffing. Finally, virtually two years to the day, in October it was all over. All education kit and resources, funded by the Home Office, was handed over to the Prison Service and all the redundant equipment in the Main

building was auctioned off. Mandy and I were the last employees and our family were the last residents on the island before the Army took over.

Our time working with the refugees was perhaps the most rewarding, entertaining yet humbling experience of both our lives. We welcomed people who had no English, who had little or no education in Vietnam but would leave the Centre with a basic ability to communicate in a foreign language and had pride in their achievement. We welcomed people who took our own children to their hearts, who would give them anything they could although they had very little themselves. We welcomed people who would cook food for us in their rooms on the most basic of equipment (not allowed but we turned a blind eye). In *ad hoc* parties our wine glasses would be topped up with whatever alcohol came to hand, so beer would go on top of wine which would go on top of port etc. – cocktails took on a different meaning. We welcomed people to the Centre who had experienced trauma, humiliation and extremes of endurance which defy understanding and yet they looked forward not back.

That brief two years taught all of us on the Island, both refugees and any who had contact with them, a tremendous amount. It was truly an amazing experience.