

This monthly article highlights one of our branch members. We hope that you enjoy knowing a little more about your fellow members and the interesting life they have had. If you have someone you would like to nominate or if you would like to help author an article, please email the editor, Ron Nakamoto, at [ron.nakamoto\(at\)yahoo.com](mailto:ron.nakamoto@yahoo.com).

MAN TRAN



Do you recall the Three Mile Island Nuclear Accident; when China first instituted the one child per family rule; when the USSR invaded Afghanistan; when Margaret Thatcher became the first woman Prime Minister in the UK; when the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini returned to power in Iran and American hostages were taken from the American Embassy; or when the Sony Walkman came to market and became a worldwide success at \$200. This was 1979, an eventful year. This was also the year that two brothers escaped from Vietnam on a twelve-meter (appx. 40 feet) boat packed with forty other souls fleeing from the stifling control of their new masters, the Communist military. The boat took to sea from Vung Tau, east of Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon) and headed for Malaysia, a 1,000 nautical mile journey.

As Man recalls, “What little food and water the passengers brought with them was soon exhausted and the passengers had to ration the ship’s water, which tasted like engine oil. The second night we ran into a fierce storm and the overweight boat rocked and rolled as the passengers huddled together below deck, heaving all through the night. The next two days we suffered in blistering heat from the hot sun. We were fortunate to run into a Thai fishing boat who spared us a little food and water. On the calm days the ocean water was so clear that I wanted to jump in to cool off but the vast ocean, with no land in sight, made me feel small and helpless so I stayed on board.

“The fourth day we saw the Malaysian islands. We were excited to see land and agitated to get to shore when the captain saw the Malaysian army on the beach and hastily anchored offshore. As the boat dropped anchor, a big surf wave broadsided the boat and immediately flipped it over. The passengers who were in a weakened state from the lack of food and water were all scattered into the ocean. My shoulder was injured as the boat flipped over. I could not swim and quickly sank to the bottom. A calm feeling came over me as I thought ‘I’m going to die; this is how I die.’ Notwithstanding my injured shoulder and that I was not a good swimmer, with a last surge I pushed myself off the bottom, surfaced and gasped for air. I saw someone floating on a plastic container and I lunged for it. The fellow holding the container was surprised and afraid and swam away so I got to rest on the container until I reached the beach. Others were not so lucky. I tried to resuscitate an old man who was lying on the beach but without success. He was gone under the very hot sun. The passengers and crew pitched in and

gathered nine bodies together while the locals watched from a distance without offering any help. It was obvious that they had seen this movie before.

“The Malaysian authorities soon took control and moved the remaining thirty-three passengers to Pulau Bidong, their refugee island. We were given food, water and temporary shelter organized by the United Nations. As we recovered we were put to work to build our own place with anything we could find in the woods and with borrowed tools. I remember having to sleep with my entire body wrapped in plastic and a bag over my head to avoid the swarm of mosquitos everywhere. Later we volunteered along with many others to help build a small makeshift hospital for the growing population of refugees.

“I was the second oldest of seven boys and one girl in my family We were a typical family in Vietnam, living a normal life until the Communist takeover. My brother and I were the first to escape to Malaysia but my parents had a plan to get the rest of the family to do the same. It was two long months before a friend told us that he had seen our parents and family (less one) on the other side of the island. We immediately made it to that side and were reunited with them. Whether it was serendipity or God I do not know but we were happy to be together again

“When we were not working, we would be writing letters and filling out paperwork to apply for immigration into the United States. Because my father had worked with the U.S. Army and because we had an uncle who was willing to sponsor us, we were granted elevated immigration status and after nine months granted passage to enter the U.S. The entire family less one of my younger brothers arrived in San Francisco in 1979. My younger brother unfortunately was caught trying to escape Vietnam and was punished in a labor camp, but through my parents’ persistence did eventually manage to emigrate to the U.S. in 1980. “

I moved to San Jose at the end of 1979 and attended vocational classes to learn English and drafting as I enjoy drawing and it is work one can do without a heavy reliance on English. I soon started working as a draftsman with Cushman Electronics. At night I enrolled in Printed Circuit Board Design classes and was promoted with this skill within a year. I continued to advance as opportunities arose with Verilink, Echo Design, Axil Computer and Sun Microsystems. At my last company, Juniper Networks, I advanced again by self-learning SKILL programming with the Cadence toolset, developing numerous software scripts that aided design automation. Much of my work is still in use at that company. I took early retirement in 2014 after suffering severe carpal tunnel in my right wrist. My boss suggested that I use my left hand, which I did for a year, but that became tedious. It was a good thing that for most of my working life I held two jobs and have become financially secure.

“I met my wife, Ngoc through my sister. She was my sister’s friend and we were immediately attracted to each other. We hung out together and later corresponded with

each other. We kept in contact as friends for the next ten years after which I proposed to her and we were married in 1993. We have been happily married for 22 years. We have two children. Our daughter graduated with her bachelor's degree in Economics from U.C. Davis and is completing her PhD in Economics at the University of Hawaii. Our son is a senior at U.C. Davis with a Computer Science and Math double major. My wife and I spend our time traveling back to Vietnam every three months. We have a condo in Ho Chi Minh City where we can relax, enjoy the food and learn how to live as locals in our motherland. We are living the good life!



“In addition to traveling, my favorite hobbies include golf and painting. Here is a sample of a portrait of my parents. I started drawing early in life with charcoal and later took a few art classes and started to paint. I was always attracted to portraits and this sample is a pastel on sanded paper which I learned from a local artist.

“From time to time, I reflect back on my life in 1975 when bullets were flying and rockets exploding near our neighborhood as the communists occupied ever-increasing parts of the city. Soldiers, smoke and explosions created confusion and frightened us as fears for our future consumed our thoughts. Our loss of freedom, the constant repression and the lack of food and necessities of life forced a determination for us to escape. We dared to dream of a better, safer life in America and after much hardship we made it. We worked hard to forge a good life and succeeded. Now my children are using their opportunity to build their own dreams. I truly appreciate the opportunities I have been given and earned here in this great nation and I've truly enjoyed the friends I have made here with SIR. So when you see me still smile on the golf course after I hit an errant shot, you will know why. 'C'est la vie, mon ami.' (That's life, my friend.)”