

### *From Strangers to Soulmates*

#### A Poem and Reflection

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#### Reflection and Dedication

For 10 years I have been blessed to have been involved with the saga of the USS Kirk DE 1087, the ship charged with rescuing the remnants of the South Vietnamese Navy the day after the fall of Saigon, April 30, 1975.

At the war's end I was about to graduate from university, on the heels of anti-war activism during the tumultuous years from 1968 through college. My anger and bitterness, rooted in the Vietnam War, lingered. In my 30's I married Jan Herman, the US Navy's medical historian, who was born the day we dropped the bomb on Hiroshima. I am a Baby Boomer, he is not. In the late '60's he served in the Air Force. I became a tree hugging hippie.

Now, fast forward to 2010 when Jan's documentary, *The Lucky Few*, screened at the USS Kirk Association reunion, where former refugees and their rescuers came together and engaged in an emotional healing process. After the screening, a Vietnamese-American woman stood and said, "I know the American people are bitter about the war. But for me and my family, we are so grateful to the USS Kirk and to the United States for rescuing us and bringing us to this country where we could live in freedom." Until that moment, I had not known a different perspective. I felt a seismic shift take place inside me. I wanted to engage with my fellow Boomers and share my new found understanding.

Master Chief Hospital Corpsman Stephen R. Burwinkel was responsible for caring for the thousands of refugees as they sailed across the South China Sea to safety in the Philippines. Unable to attend the 2010 reunion due to poor health, Jan arranged a screening of the film in Pensacola where he lived. I wrote the poem that follows during the flight from Washington, DC to Pensacola. I dedicate the poem to the memory of "Doc" Burwinkel, who died in 2014. "Doc's" selfless care of others is an inspiration to us all.



*"Doc" Burwinkel  
1941-2014*

### From Strangers to Soulmates

It was a needy time  
A fearful time  
Young men, many still in their teens  
Answered this nation's call  
To battle the communist threat  
In a land far across the sea

It was a fiery time  
An angry time  
Our soil steamed with rage of youth  
Protesting, shouting, marching, demanding  
Some even sacrificing their lives  
All against a senseless war

It was a frenzied time  
A chaotic time  
The North Vietnamese Army was closing in on Saigon  
U.S. personnel had to evacuate the embassy  
American helo pilots touched down on the roof  
And picked up our men, women, and Vietnamese friends

It was a scary time  
A heady time  
As we flew evacuees to Navy ships offshore  
Vietnamese chopper pilots, with no time to lose  
Packed their small craft with family and neighbors  
And followed the Americans to... who knew where

It was a confusing time  
A deadly time  
Some Hueys, running out of fuel  
Ditched and lost their human cargo beneath the waves  
Others, landing on ships, unloaded  
Countless frightened and bewildered refugees

It was a dangerous time  
A rescue time  
The USS Kirk's sailors, welcoming aboard strangers from a strange land  
Opened their arms and hearts to hundreds of refugees  
Comforted women and men, old and young  
And made them a safe place to rest their weary souls

## Under City Lights

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It was a daring time  
A heroic time  
A Vietnamese Chinook pilot twice failed to land his copter on the deck  
He maneuvered his craft above the fantail, steadied it  
to allow his 11 passengers to jump  
And navigated over the ocean where he jumped out, floated up  
And survived to join his family in the embracing arms of freedom

It was a mystery time  
A calm sea time  
The Kirk, sailing in harm's way back to 'Nam  
Charged to meet the remnants of the Vietnamese Navy  
Horrified to discover 30,000 refugees on 32 ships  
Thirsty, starving, ailing, desperate for human kindness  
and a place to live free

It was a dramatic time  
A miraculous time  
The Kirk's two corpsmen went from ship to ship  
Treated the sick, provided food, and offered their hearts and hands  
In compassionate care  
One human being to another

It was a hopeful time  
Yet a tragic time  
One tiny boy, Bao Le, took frighteningly sick  
Chief Burwinkel was summoned to attend to him  
Penicillin revived little Bao for several days  
But the child's lungs breathed their last  
And all eyes tearfully witnessed the somber burial at sea

It is now a connecting time  
A healing time  
As the rescued reunite with their rescuers  
Once strangers, they now embrace one another  
With gratitude, with love, with friendship, with tears  
Mending the wounds left over from the fury of the past  
Ushering in a future of blessing, of light, and of hope.



### Author Note

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