

Basic Detail Report



00031934

Title

Vietnamese refugee boats PK3402 and TU DO in Darwin

Date

1977

Primary Maker

Michael Jensen

Medium

Silver gelatin print

Dimensions

Overall: 262 x 394 mm

Name

Photograph

History

The Vietnam War ended on 30 April 1975 with the fall of Saigon to Communist forces and the reunification of North and South Vietnam. In the late 1970s thousands of Vietnamese fled the new Communist regime, escaping the country in small boats to places such as the USA, Canada and Australia. The first Vietnamese 'boat people' arrived in Darwin in 1976. By the end of 1979, 2,011 people had undertaken the perilous sea voyage from Vietnam to Australia. Many more died trying. The first wave of boat people arrived at a time of dramatic social upheaval in Australia, with spirited debate about our involvement in the Vietnam War, the new concept of multiculturalism, the breaking of many of Australia's traditional ties to Britain and the forging of new links with Asia. Despite some opposition from the wider community, the relaxation of immigration restrictions meant that most were allowed to stay. Store owner Tan Thanh Lu had fought with the South Vietnamese during the war and believed his family faced a bleak future under the new Communist regime. In 1975, he pooled resources with several friends from the island of Phu Quoc and built a boat - TU DO [Freedom]. To divert suspicion TU DO was constructed as a dragnet fishing boat typical of the region and plied its trade in the island's waters. Prior to departure in September 1977, Tan staged an engine breakdown to relax surveillance on the vessel. A powerful replacement engine was installed and the group of 39 passengers, including Tan's pregnant wife Tuyet and three children Dzung (6), Dao (4) and Mo (2) struggled across the tidal mud flats to the waiting boat. Tuyet had crushed sleeping pills into her children's food to keep them quiet and disaster almost struck when several hours out to sea, they realised Dzung had been left behind. Despite quarrels with his panicked passengers, Tan returned to find her, crying and mosquito bitten in the mangroves. TU DO outpaced pirates in the Gulf of Thailand and docked in Mersing, Malaysia where eight exhausted passengers disembarked. Tan had relatives in the United

States, but after a month of unsuccessful approaches to US immigration, Tan opted to shift course to Australia. TU DO restocked with supplies in Jakarta and rescued another Vietnamese vessel near Flores. On 21 November 1977, TU DO finally made landfall in Darwin. Tan and his crew had navigated more than 6,000 kilometres using a map torn from the lid of a school desk and a simple compass. From Darwin, the Lu's were transferred to Wacol Migrant Hostel in Brisbane. They were granted asylum after six months.