

“An Oilrig, Pirates, and a Malaysian Naval Ship”: Thomas Cao

2017. Acrylic on wood. 22 ¾ ” w by 8” h.

David Feinberg and Beth Andrews, with contributions from Storyteller Thomas Cao; and from visual artists Michelle Englund, Kimchi Hoang, Jennifer Hensel, Kristin Anton, Sima Shahriar, Paula Leiter-Pergament, Sara Feinberg, Julia Breidenbach, Jane Bollweg, and Annie Nickell.

Nineteen-year-old Thomas and his younger brother made their way to Saigon after the war in Vietnam was over. Local people hid them in basement bomb shelters until they could escape by boat under the cover of night. Thomas vividly recalls the long brick and stone path that led to the water’s edge. There, they got into large watertight baskets which they paddled by hand from the shore to a 65-foot fishing boat. The fishing boat signaled to the people in the baskets with five flashes of light. The refugees flashed five light signals back to identify themselves.

They escaped into open waters before the Viet Cong discovered them. The fishing boat was overcrowded, carrying 65 people. As they headed towards Malaysia, the waters were very rough. At some point, they were hit by a tornado, and the winds tossed people up and down, and back and forth. The men feverishly bailed water out of the boat. People were praying in every religion. They all thought they were going to die. Ultimately, the storm turned the boat around, pointing it in the wrong direction

One night, bright lights appeared in the middle of the dark Pacific Ocean. It was a large oil refinery. The men on the rig used ropes to lower bags of canned goods to the refugees from a balcony that rimmed the tall rig. Although the refugees hid the canned foods, shortly thereafter, their small boat was boarded by pirate fishermen with guns. The pirates stole all their money, gold, and canned foods. Thankfully, they did not violate the women or kidnap them, as often happened. And even though these pirates stole all their canned goods, they did cook a meal of rice and fish for the refugees. The pirates also took their GPS, but towed them for a short distance in the right direction. When asked if they would tow them farther, the pirate captain answered by crossing his arms at the wrists, signaling that his hands were tied because he could go to prison for helping them. A drawing of the crossed wrists appears on Thomas’ piece.

After a few more days and nights, the refugees saw land and decided to approach it the next day. A huge Navy Malaysian ship saw them and brought them on board with rope ladders. Thomas decided he wanted to include the naval ship in the artwork rather than fishing boat because, he said, “That’s when we knew we were saved!”

Once in Malaysia they were sent to a refugee camp, sponsored by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees. They were eventually assigned to a local family for one year; and then applied and were interviewed to immigrate to the United States. Bob Jones, from Rochester Minnesota who had been a US Ambassador, sponsored them.