

RESCUE!!

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To properly set the stage for this narrative, a short history lesson is in order. On April 30, 1975, with the fall of Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City) to North Vietnam forces under the command of General Van Tien Duong, South Vietnam quickly surrendered. This marked the end of the Vietnam War, and the reunification of Vietnam as a Socialist Republic. The capture of the city was preceded by the evacuation of American civilian and military personnel in Saigon, along with tens of thousands of South Vietnamese civilians associated with the southern regime. The evacuation culminated in Operation Frequent Wind, the largest helicopter evacuation in history. At this chaotic point, everyone was trying to get out of the country before the institution of new rules by the communists locked down the country. This regime was so oppressive that, following the end of the war, according to official and non-official estimates, between 200,000 and 300,000 South Vietnamese were sent to reeducation camps, where many endured torture, starvation, and disease while being forced to perform hard labor. Is it any wonder that people were scrambling to leave by whatever means possible?

Fast forward to April 1981. The USS Elliot (DD967), under the command of Commander Douglas. M. Norton was patrolling independently in the Gulf of Thailand. (Mr. Norton is the author of *Code Word-Paternity* and *Code Word: Pandora*, well-received novels of nuclear terrorism that strikes at the heart of America.) I was also on board as a Chief Petty Officer in charge of shipboard communications. During the month of April 1981, the Elliot rescued nearly 200 Vietnamese refugees. This was extraordinary in that, although South Vietnam surrendered in 1975, people were still fleeing the oppressive regime in 1981 in open boats on the high seas, leaving behind family, friends and all their possessions, risking death by starvation, dehydration, and/or pirates, hoping to be rescued by friendly ships and delivered to freedom. This is the story of the Nguyen family's incredible escape from Vietnam in an open 18-foot boat, their rescue by the USS Elliot on April 25, 1981, their time spent in refugee camps, their relocation to the United States, their assimilation into American society, and their courage and determination to make a better life for their family, free of tyranny.

The following excerpts from his personal logs (diary) are provided by Chief Petty Officer John Dill, also on board at that time, and show the particulars of each rescue by the Elliot. While personal logs are not considered official historical records, CPO Dill kept meticulous records, so we can be confident that the data are accurate. These logs have been edited for brevity and set the stage for the story that follows.

21 APR 81: Underway from Singapore, spotted Vietnam refugee boat. Picked up 96 refugees in 40-ft boat from Vung Tau, they were underway for ten days, no food or water for last three. Oldest 80-plus, youngest 1 ½ months. Over 60 were under 18. They applauded us. (Our "Doc"- Chief Hospital Corpsman was worried about losing that baby, trying to get some of nourishment into it without killing it was hard.)

22 APR 81: Picked up Viet refugee boat approx. 1700hrs. 20-ft long open boat, 180 NM (nautical miles) from nearest land. 11 people, one woman.

23 APR 81: Anchored Sattahip, Thailand. Transferred 107 refugees to USS John Young (DD973) and USS Bainbridge (CGN25).

24 APR 81: USS Hepburn helicopter found approx. 60 people in boat approx. 60 NM inside Vietnam ADIZ (Air Defense Identification Zone). We were prevented by the ROE (Rules of Engagement) to go after them.

25 APR 81: USS Elliot helicopter found 18' boat with approximately 15 people aboard, approx. 25 NM away. Boat had four women, five kids, youngest a toddler, had been U/W three days & two nights. They were robbed by Thai pirates from "Fishing Boat #6", who took all valuables and two young girls off boat. They had been in company of second boat, & pirates took approx. 30 women off that one. One woman in the boat had a 10-year old half-American daughter. Pulled into Pattaya Beach, Thailand and transferred all refugees to USS Juneau (LPD10). (My note: After interviewing the people from the boat we assigned the designation "Fishing Boat #6" to the Thai pirate boat. When our interviews produced as good a description of it as the refugees could give us, we sent that info out to our chain-of-command, who passed it along to the government of Thailand as well as to all US naval and military units in the area, and that produced a massive hunt for that boat. I know the Thai navy reported stopping and searching fishing boats over a wide area for several days. In other words, the "good guys" spent a significant amount of time seriously searching for the "bad guys" using air, sea and land assets in an attempt to find the pirates and free their captives. I do not believe they were successful, unfortunately, but it's a good illustration of the kind of mood all of us were in over that affair. 7th fleet and 5th Air Force were hopping mad about it, and searched with a vengeance.)

29 APR 81: Picked up 30 men in two boats approx. 120 NM East of Mekong estuary. Youngest 3, oldest approx. 50. 2 students, 3 kids, 1 soldier, 2 policemen, rest fishermen. Underway for two days. Sank one boat alongside, MISTAKE, were immediately swarmed by thousands of roaches, beat them back with firehoses. (Next time pull away & upwind to sink boat.)

Now fast forward again to June 2016, 35 years later. On June 22, 2016, Doug Norton received the following email from Son Lam T. Nguyen, asking if it was the Elliot who rescued his parents in 1981. Doug's response immediately follows. When asked how he located Doug Norton, Son replied that his parents, (Trung and Ut) only recalled the "hull number" of the ship (967), so that is where he, along with friends and future in-laws Robert and Ginny Weinstock, started his search. It also helped that Doug's bio and photo were on the back of his novel *Code Word-Paternity*. At this point, Son reached out, and our story begins with the following emails.

June 22, 2016

From: Son Nguyen

To: Douglas Norton

Good afternoon, my name is Son Lam T. Nguyen and I am writing to you because I believe you are Commander Douglas Norton of the USS Elliot 967. You rescued my parents in April of 1981 when they were Vietnamese refugees fleeing in a small boat near Thailand. I apologize for inundating your various mailboxes with messages. But I was so excited to locate you for my parents and for myself. This is such a surreal moment in my life. I often think about the opportunity you and your men gave my family and myself. I hope to never squander what you have given me.

I gave my father a baseball cap with the insignia and lettering of the USS Elliot 967 last weekend. This brought back so many memories to him. He recalls seeing sharks circling their boat and bracing everyone for the worse. But moments later the USS Elliot emerged to rescue them. I want to pass on my family's thanks and gratitude for what you have done for us. My father will be thrilled to hear you are now writing books. I cannot wait for your sequel and will be 1st in line at the signing. Thank you again and I hope you have a wonderful day.

June 22, 2016

From: Douglas Norton

To: Son Nguyen

Dear Son Nguyen,

I am pleased and amazed to hear from you about your parents and family. Ever since that day in the Gulf of Thailand, I have asked every Vietnamese I encountered how they reached America, hoping to find a person connected to Elliot. And, thanks to you, now I have.

The rescue of your family and several other refugee encounters affected all of us aboard USS Elliot profoundly. To have both the ability and the opportunity to save lives is gratifying beyond measure and also humbling. A couple of months ago we had a reunion of men from Elliot's crew of that time and we spoke of the events of that day with pride and emotion.

I deduce from your phone number that you live in the general area of Richmond, Virginia. My wife and I live not far away from there, in Annapolis, Maryland. May we come meet you and, assuming they also live in that area, your parents?

Thank you so much for tracking me down and getting in touch. I will share this good news with all the men of USS Elliot and they will be as happy as I am.

June 23, 2016

From: Son Nguyen

To: Douglas Norton

Thank you for the kind words Commander Norton. I told my parents last night about reaching out to you and your response. They were very excited to hear you live not too far from them and your crew still thinks about the incredible rescue. My mom gave me more details on how she was rescued from the boat and that it actually took place at night. She wanted me to give you an update on our other family members and friends on that boat you rescued. So please sit back and someday I will have to draw you a family tree to make sense of all this.

We all made it to America and most are still with us today. My dad's older brother and his wife and 3 kids moved to Richmond as well. The oldest daughter Jil works in real estate in Northern Virginia and her younger brother Hung is a patent examiner in Arlington. Jil has a daughter and just gave birth to a son last month. Hung is married with one son. The middle daughter, Thu, passed away a few years ago. My uncle and his wife also had another daughter named Sara born in America. She's married to one of my best friends from high school who is currently a Major in the Marines Corps. They have 4 kids now I believe (I started losing count).

My dad's older sister was also on that boat with her husband and his brother. At the time my aunt had her older daughter around age 12 and her younger daughter around age 5 with her. My uncle and his brother passed away when I was in high school. My aunt and cousins went to Philadelphia and still live there to this day. My older cousin, Trang, has a daughter in high school now. Trang graduated from St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia and works as an accountant. My aunt's younger daughter has always had health issues. We always say if she stayed in Vietnam, she would not be with us today. Before I mention anyone else, I want to share something peculiar about my aunt. As you can probably imagine she's a tough woman as most of the women who braved those waters were. But my sister and I always found her to be a bit cold and not the nicest person in the world. When we were older we also learned she is the favorite person of all the neighborhood kids in her area. She took in multiple special needs kids, helped abused children with nowhere to stay and fed neglected children with drug addict parents. I asked my mom about this strange warm and fuzzy side to her. My mom said my aunt still remembers the USS Elliot that night. Your ship stopped and rescued them when they were on the brink of death. My mom thinks she's trying to repay the favor by taking in these kids no one else wants to help, the way you and your crew took in desperate refugees no one else wanted to help.

My dad's friend San who was also on the ship lived with us in Richmond for a few years. He then moved to Detroit to work at a plastics factory that creates dashes for various GM cars. He is married and still living in the Detroit area to this day. He's one of the happiest people I know. I think living in America for him is like a kid going to a theme park except in his case there's no closing time and he gets to stay forever. My parents ended up in a refugee camp in Galang, Indonesia. I was born there with a terribly illegible birth certificate that gives the Feds headaches every time I have a security clearance update. We then landed in Philadelphia where we lived with some family for a few years. My parents then went to Richmond where my dad found work as an auto mechanic. His family owned a taxi company back in Vietnam, so my dad and his brothers all know their way around a garage pretty well. He worked at a Ford engine plant until it shut down in the mid-90s. He's still working on motors for a trucking and shipping company now. My mom worked her way up in the restaurant business to the surprise of everyone. I heard she needed directions on how to put water in a pot, let alone boil it. She's working at a country club/retirement community in Richmond now. My parents also had a daughter shortly after coming to Richmond. My sister Lisa is married to her husband Lam, whose mom worked at the US Embassy in Vietnam. I believe their entire family was flown out during evacuations. Lisa and Lam live in Richmond near our parents as well as Lam's parents.

You know your area codes pretty well. I'm just too lazy and nostalgic to change phone numbers so I kept my 804 number. I actually live in North Bethesda, MD. I work at the FDIC as an attorney in the investigations department. I'm engaged to my fiancée Andrea and we're set to be married in October provided she doesn't skip town. I mentioned to my parents that you would love to visit them in Richmond. They would be more than happy to have you visit them in Richmond should you be available any time. My family is extremely happy and excited you remember the rescue. It was life changing to say the least for us. We wish you and all your crew members the best and I hope we can stay in touch (I would be more than happy to answer any questions about my family's time in America and our experiences) and set up a meeting date.

When we communicated the information provided by CPO Dill to Son Nguyen, he responded: "25 April sounds like my parents boat! My mom mentioned pirates and the half American girl you described is my cousin Trang. Her father was an American soldier. The size of the boat and amount of people sounds about right also. I will have to tell my parents about this. You guys literally saved about an entire Vietnamese village that month! My father told me that my aunt, who was also on the boat you rescued, ran into some of the people kidnapped by the pirate boat you were searching for. As far as she knew, the people were eventually released but the women were all raped and were greatly ashamed of their ordeal. My aunt recognized some of the women and told them it was ok, she did not want to pry into the details but was just glad they were alive, and she wanted to know if everyone made it. It seems the pirates did not want to feed or be responsible for them and eventually abandoned them. All the women and children then walked to the refugee camp. My dad tells us the funny story that before they were rescued by the Elliot my mom was brushing her teeth using bottled water, and he told her to quit that or the other people in the boat were going to throw her overboard.

Son continues: "After the Elliot transferred my family, remember my mom was pregnant with me at the time, to Thailand we were processed in the refugee camp and applied to be able to immigrate to America. We were given the choice of a few other countries as well. I believe Australia was an option as well as Sweden and some other Scandinavian countries, however my parents did not know anyone in Australia and had never even heard of any Vietnamese people living there. My father knew Sweden could be very cold, and he had never experienced a real winter, so that was not an option. Also, we already had lots of friends and family in America who started immigrating in the 70s, so that was the easy choice to make. Luckily, when you are rescued by an American Naval ship, you are usually given a very good number in

terms of the wait list to be able to come to America. Generally, you receive a much better number than someone who walked across the border. This is because of the perilous trip immigrating by sea. Walking, while also very dangerous and grueling, is hard to prove sometimes. There were cases of Viet Cong and North Vietnamese sympathizers getting dropped off a few miles from Thailand refugee camps and then they would claim they walked hundreds of miles to get there. Going by boat sort of proves you are willing to gamble it all and are crazy and desperate enough to risk everything no matter what. My aunt's husband and his family immigrated a year before we did. His boat sank, and he and his sister were the only survivors out of dozens of people including his parents and other siblings. However, our good fortune was about to end though. My dad's immigration number was then sold to another immigrant by some unscrupulous and crooked Thai officials at the refugee camp. They switched my dad's number with another man who literally gave every last penny and the shirt off his back to be able to get my dad's number for himself and his son. My dad was not bitter at all though. He knew the man who got his number; he walked from Vietnam to Thailand with his son on his back through some of the densest jungles and dangerous areas run by local gangs and warlords. The man had been waiting in Thailand for years now. My dad was happy he was able to go but was upset he had to give up everything he owned. Their numbers were not that far apart, and he would have been able to go to America within a few months anyway. I'm going to add a selfish note to this story right now. Had their numbers not been switched, I would have been born in America and likely saved myself the constant headaches growing up with a botched birth certificate and green card that spelled my legal name wrong. Also, now I'll never be president! So, my dad's new number meant we would stay in the refugee system for another few months before we could be processed by INS and given green cards (or I guess it's an alien card back then.) Now when I say we, I mean my parents because at the time I'm still just tagging along – my mom was 3 months pregnant with me at the time! “

“My parents were sent to Galang, Indonesia to another refugee camp, and had to attend classes on how to be an American, and what to expect in America compared to Vietnam. This was in the fall of 1981, a few months after you rescued my parents. I was born on October 5th, 1981. The person typing my birth certificate typed in October 3rd, 1981 because there was another kid born on that date. Instead of typing new birth certificates, they just scratched out the date with an ink pen and wrote over it. This is unacceptable to all the government agencies and services I have dealt with all my life. The Department of Motor Vehicles in Virginia almost did not issue me a driver's license. When I applied for naturalization and citizenship, Homeland took two weeks to decide what to do with my case. To this day, my legal birthday is October 3rd, 1981 on all my government documentation and systems. Homeland said it cannot be changed unless I get a new copy (from the refugee camp). I don't plan on going back there (even if I could).”

“My parents were given several choices on where they would be located in America. I believe we could live in Texas, southern California (would have been my choice but nobody asked me) or Philadelphia. My great uncle and great aunt immigrated to Philadelphia with all their kids the year before, so my parents chose to live in Philadelphia. Here's another side note. INS messed up my legal name. It should be Son Lam Thanh Nguyen. They put Lam Thanh Son Nguyen instead. So, for the longest time, my driver's license and other documents like my degrees have this spelling. All because of that switch. We arrived in Philadelphia in mid-January 1982. My mom remembers how cold it was and it was her first time, seeing snow. She didn't like it. Growing up in the tropics, my parents never grew to appreciate snow and just see it as a pain in the butt. I guess when you never had snow days in school, it's hard to love the sight of 2 feet of snow.”

“My mom remembers her first apartment in Philadelphia. It had a weird smell and she got a bad vibe from it. My mom gets bad vibes from everything, so my dad just ignored her. Turns out my mom was right. The weird smell was very strong cleaning solution. Someone was murdered in the apartment a few days before they rented it. Luckily, they were able to get another apartment when they complained the fumes were bad for a newborn (you’re welcome mom and dad). They didn’t stay in Philadelphia for too long. After less than a year, my mom did not want to experience another winter like that and they looked for places in Richmond, VA. My dad’s brother and his family (you rescued them on the same boat) was living in Richmond at the time already. His number was never traded by anyone, so he beat us coming to America by a few months. We lived in Richmond/Glen Allen, VA from then on. My sister was born in January 1983 with copious amounts of issues such as failed kidneys, urinary tract and other internal organ problems. If this was Vietnam, she would never have made it. But luckily, the doctors at MCV (Main Hospital Virginia Commonwealth University Health System) pretty much fixed everything and she’s perfectly normal (if not a bit mean) today. “

Additional emails follow:

July 6, 2016

From: Douglas Norton

To: Son Nguyen, John Dill

Son, this is just so inspiring! Thanks for discovering and sharing your family’s amazing story. We’d love to see family pictures and perhaps our Elliot network can come up with some as well. I have a copy of the Elliot “cruise book” (think of it as a school yearbook and you’ll be close) for that year, including a few pictures of rescues. Wouldn’t it be amazing if your family is among those pictures! I happen to have two copies of that book and will present one of them to your family when we get together.

Cheers,

Doug

July 6, 2016

From: Son Nguyen

To: Douglas Norton, John Dill

I should be the one thanking you all. My parents know of countless boats that never made it or were captured by the North Vietnamese enroute to sea. Also, I forget my name isn't exactly "gender friendly" in terms of identifying male/female. Truth be told, I just assumed you were speaking to my mom and kind of just asking me to relay the message. These are all her stories anyway, I'm just the messenger. John, please feel free to share my parents' story and any of my contact information to your fellow crew members. I'm sure they were wondering what happened to that boat kidnapped by pirates all these years. They'll be relieved to know the women and children did survive and made it to the Thai refugee camp eventually despite their ordeal.

Commander Norton, my parents would like to visit you in Annapolis July 17th on Sunday if that is alright with you. We hope to bring my sister as well if she is available. I am going home this weekend to Richmond and will scan all of our old photos and share them with you and John online. Have a great Wednesday everyone!

On July 17, 2016 we had a wonderful get together at Doug and Janie’s house in Annapolis, MD, and finally got a chance to meet this courageous family. Enjoying the reunion were Trung, Ut, Lisa, and Son Nguyen; Son’s fiancé Andrea Weinstock and her parents Robert and Ginny Weinstock; Patrick Dill, his wife Emile, and their son Gus (all representing CPO John Dill); and of course, myself and my wife Connie. To say that this was an emotional meeting is a vast understatement. It was such an outpouring of hugs, backslaps,

handshakes, tears of joy, and immediate love and affection that carried throughout the day. And yes, there was also pride in that we of the Elliot crew were able to play a part in bringing this truly American success story to life. It is an amazing story when one recalls that Trung and Ut (3 months pregnant!) fled Vietnam in an open 18-foot boat with virtually no provisions except some food and water, were rescued by a friendly ship (what are the odds of that!), made it through refugee camps, and arrived in the US with minimal language skills. From there, these wonderful people found work, put two children through college, and became a true American refugee success story. In fact, both parents still hold full time jobs today! At the end of that most joyous day Son and Andrea invited Doug and me and our wives to attend their upcoming wedding and to meet the rest of their family. We are honored beyond words and will represent the entire USS Elliot crew. I believe Doug's email below captures the spirit of that day.

July 25, 2016

From: Doug Norton

To: Son Nguyen, Robert Weinstock

Dear Nguyens and Weinstocks,

When the Nguyen and Weinstock families left our house, Janie and I felt such a glow, such a gathering of positive energy —and it's still with us. Not still with us are the spring rolls, fried rice and banana pudding— boy were they good! (We rationed the rice all the way until yesterday.) We are looking forward to seeing everyone (and more) again on October fifteenth.

The story of our gathering has rippled out through the thirty or so former Elliot crew who are in touch, spreading the positive effects. We know Trung and Ut would like to be in touch with the helicopter crew who first sighted their boat and hope to find them eventually.

Cheers,

Doug and Janie

There is another story to tell, told by John Dill, of one particular refugee's incredible journey to the US. As John relates: "I know that some of the refugees spent years just trying to leave Thailand. For example: my next-door neighbor flew Forward Air Control missions in Laos, and usually had a Hmong tribesman in his back seat (the back seat refers to a plane where the front seat is occupied by the pilot, and the back seat occupied by the spotter) who could speak to General Vang Pao's soldiers on the ground. He became very close to one of those backseaters during his tour in Laos. Afterward Laos fell to the communists the backseater and his young, pregnant wife were forced to flee. They made for Thailand but were separated in a night ambush by the Pathet Lao, and the man never saw her again. It took him nearly 5 years to make his way to the U.S., where he settled in Los Angeles, married, had a new family, and built a successful business. Perhaps 6 years ago his wife died, and other family members, trying to help him cope with the loss, encouraged him to "reach out" and try to find old comrades from his days of flying with the American air force. That he did, entirely successfully, and has renewed his friendship with my neighbor. But the staggering news is that just after re-finding his old pilot, he literally bumped into a lady at a Hmong gathering in California who proved to be the wife he had lost all those decades ago in Laos. She had survived, assumed him to be dead, made her own way to the U.S. with her baby, and re-married. And she was at that Hmong gathering because her husband had died, and her family and friends encouraged her to get out and meet "new" people. This all sounds like a Hollywood melodrama, but it is true, and even has a happy ending. My neighbor's old backseater re-met and re-married his first wife, met his adult son for the first time, and is now a regular attendee at the US Air Force reunions for my neighbor's old unit every year in San Antonio, Texas. Whoever's in charge "Up There" does indeed move in mysterious ways. Like Skipper Doug writing a book, and through that Son Nguyen finding us"

Skipper Doug Norton and I, and our wives, attended Andrea and Son Nguyen's wedding on Saturday, Oct 15th. What an absolutely fabulous day that was! We met several additional members of this family, some who were also on the same boat as the Nguyens. We had of course already met Son's parents Trung and Ut, his fiancé Andrea, and his sister Lisa, at the reunion. At the wedding we met Trung's sister, her daughter, and her son, who were also on that same boat. When rescued those children were ages nine and four, respectively. Trung's sister's husband and her brother were also on that boat, however they passed away several years ago. As Son said in one of his emails, we rescued an entire village that day. There were many emotional highs at the wedding. At the beginning of the ceremony the pastor recognized Doug and me by name and told the guests that were it not for the Elliot none of them would be here that day and thanked us for making this day possible. I have to say that I had a lump in my throat, a tear in my eye, and a tremendous sense of pride for the USS Elliot. And at the wedding reception Son's dad Trung asked Doug and me to stand and be recognized. I can't recall how many people came over to our table to shake hands and thank us for what the Elliot did. One member of the family, who came down from Philadelphia, said "This whole thing is because of what you did. None of this could have happened without you." Truly amazing! We got so many hugs and pats on the back from Trung, (for a small man, he has an extremely powerful hug and backslap!) that if the Heimlich maneuver had been required, we would only have to call Trung over for a hug and backslap! As we were taking our goodbyes Son told us that when he was younger, whether on the soccer field or in school, whenever he felt like quitting, he would always think of the Elliot. His thoughts were that since the Elliot did not give up and pass by his family's boat when there was so little hope of rescue, that there was no way he was going to quit. He asked if he could bring some members of his family to the next Elliot reunion so that they could thank each of us personally. Of course, they are most welcome!

About two weeks after the wedding, Doug Norton and I and our wives were invited by Lapha Ha Van (recall that she is Trung Nguyen's sister), to attend what was initially described as a party. Upon receiving subsequent emails, the description of the "party" quickly escalated to a full-blown coat & tie gathering of the Vietnamese Community Committee for Maryland, Virginia, and Wash DC, at the Fortune restaurant in Falls Church, VA. The Committee had reserved the entire restaurant, and the party was attended by nearly 600 people. Doug aptly described the evolving emails best as slowly unfolding an Origami figure to get to the piece of paper.

The evening started out by greeting all those we had previously met at the reunion at Doug's house and at Son and Andrea Nguyen's wedding. And of course, there were many more at the dinner who came by to say hello, shake hands or hug, and say thank you. Trung Nguyen came over and gave his standard Heimlich maneuver hug. I believe the dinner courses were: Deep fried crab ball, crab soup, roast duck, beef strips with green vegetables, fried whole shrimp with a crispy coating, rice with shrimp, and fried tofu and eggplant. I personally do not "do" tofu, but the rest was superb! I had to curb my appetite, or I would have dozed off on the way home. I guess the feeling is somewhat akin to what happens after Thanksgiving dinner - you eat enough for three, then you loosen the belt and collapse into a food coma in your favorite chair to watch football.

During dinner, while the MC was speaking (in Vietnamese of course), some folks at our table picked up "Elliot" and "967", so at that point we knew it was time for us to head up to the front of the restaurant. A young lady introduced us and then read to the audience, this time in English, how the Elliot rescued 200 plus refugees during 1981-1983. Remember we were standing in front of 600 people, including political figures, and personal and TV cameras! On behalf of the Vietnamese community Barbara Comstock (R), congresswoman from the 10th Congressional District in Virginia, presented plaques to Doug and me. The plaques are absolutely beautiful. The ship at the top of the plaque is of course the USS Elliot, the boat on

the bottom is the same type boat in which the Nguyen family and others made their escape. Doug said a few words accepting the plaques on behalf of the entire Elliot crew.

As we were leaving, Son Nguyen again asked when we planned another reunion as his parents and a few others would like to meet us and personally thank each of us for rescuing them. He said they will travel to wherever we have our reunion. I am so impressed by this amazing community. They left Viet Nam with nothing or had whatever valuables they left the country with stolen by pirates and built a new life for themselves and their families. One lady in particular asked me: "Do you know what I love most about this country?" She said: "I can say whatever I want and don't have to worry that someone will take me away and lock me up. In Viet Nam I could never say what I say here."

A final thought on the most emotional highlight of the evening. At the beginning of the festivities, the MC asked for quiet, and announced: "Please stand for the singing of the American and Viet Nam national anthems in honor of the more than 58,000 Americans who gave their lives defending our country." The attendees stood at attention with hands over hearts, singing both anthems. I am so proud to be an American.

POSTSCRIPT!

The USS Elliot "Goat Locker" (Chief Petty Officer's Mess to all you civilians), has held two CPO reunions, the first from April 7-10, 2016 at Ft. Walton Beach, FL, the second from April 12-15, 2018 at San Diego, CA. (A third reunion is in the very early planning stages!) At both reunions, invitations were extended to select members of the wardroom. Also, for the second reunion, wives were invited. Without being long winded, suffice to say that a grand time was held by all at both events. Although the Nguyen's could not attend the FL event, the second reunion was attended by Son Lam Nguyen, his wife Andrea Weinstock, Son's father Trung, and Andrea's parents Robert and Ginny Weinstock. On Jul 21, 2018 Son Lam and Andrea hosted a get together at their new townhome. One of the photos I took shows the USS Elliot DD967 ball cap, the Flag Set, and wedding photos of Son Lam and Andrea, prominently displayed in a lighted alcove off the kitchen. The ball cap was given to Trung at an earlier gathering, but the flag set was presented to him at the San Diego reunion. I believe the display is a continuing reminder how lucky we all are; the Nguyens that the Elliot was there at that place and time, and how lucky America is to have this wonderful family who makes us so proud.