

## Interview with Patrick Lam

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Interviewer: Mark DePue

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DePue: Welcome. My name is Mark DePue and I'm the Director of Oral History with the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, and today I'm really excited to have Patrick Lam with us. And I'll be talking to Patrick about his experiences as a Vietnamese boat person. Now you're probably looking at Patrick and saying, "He must have been awfully young." And you were, weren't you?

Lam: Yes, yes.

DePue: Okay. Well, let's start at the beginning of your life, where I always like to start. Now, before I do that, I did want to mention that you have been interviewed by somebody else in our program before as part of our immigrant stories series.

Lam: Yes.

DePue: So today we're going to be talking about the early parts of your life to the point where you leave Vietnam and the steps that happened after that, and then got to the United States. And then we'll abruptly end the conversation and let anybody who's interested to hear the rest of your story pick it up from there.

Lam: Sure.

DePue: But let's start at the beginning and tell us when and where you were born.

Lam: I was born in Vietnam – Saigon, Vietnam – in, uh, 1970, August 10, 1970.

DePue: Okay. And what was your name at the time?

Lam: At the time, it was, uh, spelled P-H-A-T, just like the product that's going out right now, and it's pronounced, "Phat." Last name is B-U-I, Bui. So in our culture, the last name goes first, first name goes last. So it's Bui Tan Phat. B-U-I.

DePue: So is the "Phat" would be considered the familiar, or the personal, name?

Lam: Yes. Yes, so that would be the first name, but you know in, in America you pronounce it, "Phat Tan Bui." Flip flop.

DePue: Well, we're already confused, aren't we?

Lam: Yes.

DePue: Okay. Where did you grow up?

Lam: I grew up in Saigon, and then after the war, I was moved to a small province called Lái Thiêu. It's more of the countryside. And after my, after the war, you know, my dad passed away in '74. So we moved and we lived with different relative just to help out my mom. She was left with four kids, including myself.

DePue: Your father passed away in '74?

Lam: Yes.

DePue: That's a tumultuous time in Vietnamese history. Did he die of natural causes?

Lam: He died of a roadside bomb, from I was told, on his way back by himself at night to visit my mom. She was in labor with my youngest brother. And normally he would travel with the US convoy so he was protected. But he was an interpreter, for the US Embassy, so on his way back that one night for leave of absence, that's when he was ambushed by the, the VC, the Viet Cong at that time.

DePue: Well, let's, uh, pick it up from there then. When did you actually escape Vietnam? What was the year?

Lam: The year was 1979. And I believe it was somewhere in the middle of the year. I don't know the exact month that we left, but I left with my, immediate or relatives from my mom's side. Aunts and uncles.

DePue: You, you mentioned your name, and that's not the name I introduced you as.

Lam: Correct.

DePue: What was your family name, again?

Lam: Uh, family name, my birth name, was Bui. B-U-I.

DePue: That's a Vietnamese name, correct?

Lam: Correct.

DePue: Is Lam a Vietnamese name?

Lam: Uh, Lam is a Vietnamese slash Chinese, just because during the Chinese occupancy of our country, there are a lot of mixed Chinese culture. So Lam is my actual, uh, uncle-in-law's name when he adopted me, so I got the name Lam.

DePue: What was the family's religion?

Lam: Buddhism.

DePue: Do you remember, do your parents have any other stories that they passed on to you about the experiences they had in those last years of the war in Vietnam?

Lam: My mom, sometimes she tells the story how people escape, when the fall of Saigon to the Communists, people who get on helicopter at the US Embassy trying to escape out. If my dad was alive, we would probably be one of the first families to be evacuated, just because of the connection with the US military.

DePue: I think it probably will surprise some people to realize the war ended in 1975.

Lam: Yes.

DePue: And Americans' perception of Vietnamese boat people was this flood of Vietnamese who got out of the country in the days and the months right after the fall of, of Saigon. And I think that was in April or May of 1975, and yet your story is 1979.

Lam: Yes, yes. The reason is, I guess we didn't have the resources, didn't have the, the, you know, the connection to do that until '79. That's when my grandmother, organized this group, of family members, relatives to, you know, to start leaving the country.

DePue: Okay. Tell me in as much detail, then, as you can about how the plan – well, let's start with this. Why? Why did she want to get you guys out?

Lam: She, you know, with her view of what's going on with the country under the new government, Communism, there was no life back then. There was no future for anybody, even though you had a good education. Uh unless you had connections with the government, life was pretty much at a dead end for most of us, you know, and the younger generation. So I think it took my grandmother from '75 to '79 to realize that she needed to get us out of the country to have a future for all of us.

DePue: When you say, "out of the country," was it the plan right from the beginning to get to the United States?

Lam: The plan was, and from what I, you know, heard from my aunt and uncle, was just to get out of country. Anywhere was better than being under communism.

DePue: That's saying quite a bit. Do you remember anything about your life in Vietnam at that time?

Lam: I remember growing up, on the countryside, uh, my great-grand parents. Things were passed down from generation to generation, so we, you know, I move, and after the end of the war. I lived with my father's side and then I moved to my mother's side of the family and lived in Lái Thiêu. Lái Thiêu is, again, a small, province of, of Vietnam, 40 kilometers northeast of, of Saigon. Now it's known as Hồ Chí Minh.

DePue: So what does your mom, widowed, with four kids, do to keep the family alive?

Lam: Well, she started out after my, you know, the shock that my dad passed away. She got the news, didn't get to see him, you know, and after, after that, she put my oldest brother, sent my oldest brother to live with my dad's side of the family, and then I, uh, well on my, my mom's side, grandmother's side, and I lived up in Lái Thiêu. Then when we got older, she was able to handle all of the kids. Then we all reunited in that area and then from there, that's when my grandmother decided to let's get me out of the country since I was the most stubbornest, you know, kid in, in the family of four, four kids.

DePue: The most stubborn?

Lam: Yeah.

DePue: Or the one with the most promise?

Lam: I, I don't know that. You would have to ask her that. But I was pretty, you know, pretty tough then, with the family, with me being the second oldest in the family.

DePue: Well, one thing that I'm curious about is that you keep talking about your grandmother. Is that kind of typical of the way Vietnamese family culture

would work, that the grandmother would have such a, a prominent role in decisions like this?

Lam: At other families, I don't know, but with us my grandmother was instrumental to getting us out of the country.

DePue: This is your maternal grandmother?

Lam: Maternal, maternal grandmother. She ran a business and she has, had money hidden away because when the Communists took over they would confiscate everything in your house, made everybody the same class. There was nobody richer than the other. They would take all your, you know, valuable possession. She had money and jewelry hidden away, so she used that to buy tickets for us to leave the country.

DePue: Buy tickets?

Lam: Yes.

DePue: But that sounds like the Vietnamese government was allowing people to leave.

Lam: To a certain extent. You had to do closed, behind closed doors, a lot of under the table. So she, I don't know how that whole process worked, but she was able to get connected with boat owners. They build boats and you pay them enough tickets, they let however people you pay for to get in a boat and try to get you out of the country.

DePue: Okay well let's talk about that, and I think there's a map here that we can look at because I know that the departure point for you is – I'm, you're gonna have to help me with the pronunciation – but I believe it's Mỹ Tho?

Lam: Yes, Mỹ Tho.

DePue: Mỹ Tho.

Lam: Yeah, Mỹ Tho.

DePue: And this is, on the Mekong Delta, and that's what surprised me, I was expecting when you told me this that it would be right on the ocean. And this is on the delta, probably, I don't know, ten, fifteen miles up, up river.

Lam: Yeah, that's, I'm not familiar with the landscape and the geography of Vietnam, but I know that when we left it was the middle of the night, it was raining. When we got on board it was just pitch black, and that's, a lot of the times boats would leave at that time of the day just because, uh, to avoid being detected by other city, you know, officials and so forth. So it was basically escaping quietly.

- DePue: Well that's what threw me off when you said you were buying tickets because it doesn't sound like the, the officials in the Vietnamese government were excited about having you leave.
- Lam: No, no. If they caught you leaving they would sink and then you swam back in, they will put in you detention camp.
- DePue: Did you understand that at the time?
- Lam: No, no. I was just going along with the trip. And, you know, I had some, I had tears before, two days before my mom came down to Saigon, it was Saigon back then and not Hồ Chí Minh, saying bye to me and, telling me that, uh, listen to my aunt and uncle. I travel with them, I've never lived with them before, until this whole event. So, that was pretty much it. And she said just, "Take care and I'll see you whenever I see you."
- DePue: In other words, your mother stayed in Vietnam?
- Lam: Correct. She stayed behind because she was the older sister. She had to stay behind to take care of my grandma and grandpa.
- DePue: And were your other siblings staying as well?
- Lam: Yes. I guess she didn't want to put everything in one basket, you know, risking all the lives, because you, it's a fifty-fifty chance that you get out and survive the, the open ocean, open sea. So, my three siblings stayed behind to help her, manage the area, the land.
- DePue: Did you get adopted then by your aunt and uncle?
- Lam: Yes. When I left, there was no paperwork. My uncle-in-law's last name was Lam so they totally just erased my birth name and put me on the, the paperwork as, as Phat Lam. It's a correct pronunciation, Phat Lam, and as part of the family then I can travel with them.
- DePue: Did you change your birth date as well at that time?
- Lam: I didn't change at that time, they didn't ask for birthday. But when we came to the United States, paperwork was processed, so they just pick a birthday because we couldn't get communication with homeland back then because once you're out, you can't even send letters back, there was no email or telephone calls. This was really early after the war so they said just picked a date that made sense to them, and went with that.
- DePue: What's gone through your mind then when you're getting on that boat in the middle of the night and then sailing very quietly, I would guess, down the delta?

Lam: I just remember being very sad. I think my mom was there saying bye and cry. My grandparents were there. I just came along as a kid. You know, they tell you, "You need to go." Shed some tears before that, and after that it was just accepting that, okay, I needed to go, I was instructed to go with my new family, and then we went from there. So I didn't, I can't recall how bad it was, but I know it was a sad moment for everybody.

DePue: How many people in your family were leaving with you?

Lam: Uh, a total of twelve, including me.

DePue: So who all would that include?

Lam: That would include my aunt and her husband, uncle-in-law. And several of my cousins, young cousins about my age, a little bit younger.

DePue: Two aunts?

Lam: I'm trying to think here, there were one, two, three. Three aunts and then their, their husbands, with my youngest aunt who wasn't married at the time, and then cousins.

DePue: Can you describe the boat for us?

Lam: Oh boy. It was a wooden boat. It had two decks, just one where the captain was sitting, and then the deck, and then below. So we were stacked like sardines in the boat. My uncle, I asked him recently, he said there were about two hundred to three hundred on board the boat.

DePue: Was there room enough so you could sit down or lay down if you needed to?

Lam: Yes. Yeah, yeah, there was. You could sit on top or go down, you know, in the cargo area in the back.

DePue: Did the family have anybody who was already in the United States?

Lam: Yes, on my uncle-in-law's side.

DePue: The uncle that had adopted you?

Lam: Yes, the one that, last name Lam. Tan Lam is his, his name. His dad and his brother, were already in America at the time.

DePue: Where, do you know?

Lam: Yes. Port Arthur, Texas.

DePue: Is that where the family was hoping to end up?

Lam: I, I guess, yeah. When we're lost at sea, we're desperate to get to somewhere safe first and then deal with the paperwork later.

DePue: Okay, lost at sea. Tell us about once you got to the open ocean, what happened after that?

Lam: I, you know, I didn't, every step of the way, didn't pay attention. Just things I remember was that the boat was being chased by Malaysian pirates. The women and children were told to go down in, you know, the boat, inside the boat, and the men were on top chanting and screaming back and yelling as we were running away from the pirate ship. And their superstition for the pirates, Malaysian pirates, was that if you're trying to get on, you know, capture a boat and they're fighting back, that's a bad thing. So they, after a short amount of chase, they gave up. Lucky for us because we didn't have any weapon on board. I think I was told we had machetes just to help us if we were lost at sea and got on an island or something that would help us survive. They left us alone after that chase.

DePue: Why would the Malaysian pirates be interested in a boat full of Vietnamese refugees in the first place?

Lam: You know, I can only say from what my, relatives told me that they believed that there's jewelries, there's precious items that's hidden inside the boat for us to start to trade when we find a, you know, land on a place so that's the reason why, just treasures, that's what they were thinking.

DePue: Was that the case, was that the case with some of your family?

Lam: Yeah, they, we, they brought things to barter with because money, currency was no good in Vietnam back then, so a lot of them would have jewelries with them hidden away. And I know, what I'm told, the boat captain, captain had expensive things hidden away in the boat, too.

DePue: Was it your understanding that the boat captain would deliver you someplace and then go back to Vietnam?

Lam: Oh no, he would go with us as well.

DePue: Okay, so that boat would never go back.

Lam: No, it's a one, was a one-way trip.

DePue: How about food and water?

Lam: I remember starting out, they gave us bags of dried crackers and bottled water. I guess it's in barrels, I didn't see that, but we ran, we ran out of food and water after being lost at sea. I don't know how many days there was but that's when we ran into the oil rig.

- DePue: Do you have any idea? A week, or a couple weeks?
- Lam: Uh, my uncle told me it was about a week or so.
- DePue: Did you hit any storms?
- Lam: Uh, I don't remember. The only thing I remember was trying, the boat was trying to maneuver away and trying to outrun the, the pirates at sea at that time.
- DePue: Did you spend most of your time on the boat then underneath, under the deck?
- Lam: Just a lot of things, up and down, I don't remember how many, how much time I was up and down.
- DePue: I'm pressing the memory quite a bit for somebody who was, what, eight years old?
- Lam: Eight, eight, eight or nine at the time, yeah, yeah.
- DePue: Okay.
- Lam: I just, you know, these dramatic events that happened, that's where it stuck most in my head.
- DePue: Okay, I'd like to look at this next map. It's got from Mÿ Tho to an oil rig, and if you look at the bottom left of this map over here you see a tiny little oil rig, and I don't know if that's the oil rig that you ran into, but it sounds like it's a logical location. Maybe there is a whole series of oil rigs out there, I just don't know. But what can you tell me about after being in the, the water, you're probably getting scared of sharks?
- Lam: Yeah, I think it was just exhausted, exhaustion. People were throwing up all over the place because of seasickness, no food, no water. It was desperate, but luckily we ran into this oil rig. And the oil rig, official, the captain of that oil rig, told our boat captain to sink the boat so they can convert that into a rescue mission. Because of political reasons, they didn't want to take them on board unless it's, it's a rescue. I was told that the boat captain, our boat captain, didn't want to sink the boat because he apparently had some valuable stuff hidden in there. He believed he could maneuver and navigate to a safe place. So all they asked for was food and water, food and water before they took off. And my, luckily my family had flotation device, and we had to make a decision at that time: jump off or stay, continue with that boat. So the final decision was for my, the twelve members of my family to jump into the water. And along came two other people also on that boat that came, came off who could swim and who was able to take that risk.

DePue: So out of the two hundred people on the boat, only fourteen jumped in the water?

Lam: That's what my uncle told me, yeah. And I remember the whole image, how they spray out this white chemical to keep the fish away. They call those swordfish, and they were big, we saw later after when we got on the oil rig, but we were bouncing in that water. The oil rig didn't lower the basket to rescue us until our boat were out of sight.

DePue: Do you know who was operating the oil rig?

Lam: No, I, I don't know.

DePue: Well, before we got started, we were speculating it was an American oil rig?

Lam: Yes.

DePue: It was?

Lam: My uncle, he, he was very, he is fluent in English and French, and he was able to interpret and, you know, communicate with the, the captain of that oil rig.

DePue: We were speculating before we started it might have been an Esso oil rig.

Lam: Yes, that's what he said. I thought it was Exxon, but he, he told me, he kept on saying Esso, so I think that might be the right name for it.

DePue: Okay, explain, now that you're the water, what happens next?

Lam: After the boat, our boat, got out of sight, then they lowered this big crane. It was like a basket, you know, catching people or, or supplies, they lowered down to the water and we all hop into it and they lifted us up and then we were on board this oil rig. And we were so happy. You know, my aunts and uncle were in tears and the uncle that helped translated, he, again, married to my aunt, and, you know, he helped us, communicate with, with the, the people on board, on board the oil rig. And first impression was we're at least we were out of the water. They gave us blankets and they brought us apples and eggs, which I couldn't eat the eggs because after being at sea for a while, you couldn't get anything heavy inside. But the apple was delicious. I've never had an apple growing up in Vietnam, this was the first time, you know. Looking at this apple, and wow, look at this fruit, and I just kept it in and just ate it slowly at a time the whole night over there. So it was, you know, quite an exciting moment to be rescued, and know that at least you're out of the water, being saved, thinking that we're going to go to America because this was an American oil rig. We were all hoping that.

DePue: One of the things that surprised me when you, you just talked about this is spraying the water with some kind of white substance. Did you figure out, did it become clear to you why they had to do that?

Lam: Yes, my uncle told me afterwards, they explained to him, that they had to do that to keep all the fish, sharks away.

DePue: Well, you'd mentioned when we first began to talk about this, too, that you saw some of that.

Lam: Yes, after we got on board at night when the chemicals were all dissipated and gotten the water cleared up, I guess every oil rig has a little burner that, that keeps the flame going, so the warm water and the light attracted all this big fish. We were, I think that was like a four or five story oil rig because when we looked down that night, it was swamped with huge fish about twice the length of, you know, adult person, not including the sword, the sharp sword in front of its head. So that, they said that they could have easily eaten us alive if they didn't spray that out. And I remember seeing it and it was just on top of one another swimming down there.

DePue: Well I would imagine an eight year old boy, that would get your attention.

Lam: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

DePue: How long were you on the oil rig?

Lam: I, I think the next morning when the helicopter came, landed, and we were like, "All right! We're going to America!" Well they put us, you know, next day, put us on another boat. This was, uh, I think it was a battleship belonging to, either to the Indonesian or Malaysian government. And then they took us, with our group, took us to another site.

DePue: Okay. I think it's time then we can see this next site, you can see the, the oil rig is in the middle of this map that I've got here, and then towards the bottom center of the map is a little red dot here and that's supposed to represent Kuku Island. And you and I talked about this before, when I was looking for Kuku Island, I did find something. Uh, it threw me off because of Kuku Island, Indonesia. But this is right off, right off the Malaysian coast. Does that sound right to you?

Lam: Yes.

DePue: And this is, looked to me, to be a tiny, tiny island.

Lam: It was. It was a small island. I remember leaving that, you know, when we were on this metal ship, as opposed to a wooden ship or boat, they had, uh, military guys with machine guns standing and staring straight at all of us. And

we were so scared, didn't think that they would let us live. We didn't know where they were taking us.

DePue: They weren't friendly to you?

Lam: They didn't speak our language, so we were just kinda two people who were just kinda worried. Here were a bunch of us, no weapons, nothing. And here are these few other guys on, on board with military uniform and machine guns. So we were like, "Uh oh, we're at their mercy." One of my uncles, had to, kinda try to make friends with them, and he offered them a watch that he had on. I don't know if it's a Rolex or whatever it was, but and then, you know, we kind of broke the ice there and made everything kind of friendly environment.

DePue: So the naval officer took the watch, it sounds like.

Lam: I, I think so. I don't remember, but he, he told me he was trying to do that. And I remember the image he was trying to come up there and talk because were just sitting there in a group, huddled together, worried. They didn't take us directly to Kuku. They took us to another location where they rescue a boat just like ours that was attacked by pirates. And on this boat, I remember getting on board, there were only men, just men left with blisters the size of water balloons under their feet. And they told us that the pirates killed the women, kidnapped the kids, raped them, and then made the men stand on top of the boat. That's why they had blisters, because of the sun, the heat. But somehow, luckily, they survived. So that boat that they put us on was made more than half empty.

DePue: How many people on that boat?

Lam: I, I don't know, it wasn't a lot. It was a few, if my memory can, bring back when they put us on that boat they dragged us out into the sea again. And that's when were like, "Uh oh. We're supposed to go to America. What happened here?" Luckily they were kind enough to direct us to that Kuku Island. And we were the first boat to land on that island.

DePue: Were there, were there some officials waiting there for you?

Lam: There was no official. From what we remember, there wasn't even native living on that island as far as we know. It was just completely virgin territory, white sand, but we, lucky we got on to, you know, to that.

DePue: How does a group of desperate, starving Vietnamese refugees survive on Kuku Island then?

Lam: I remember getting on the island. It was raining again, same, same situation when we left Vietnam. Uh, sitting in a group, I guess we elected someone to be a leader of the group. And they divided little plots of land, probably ten by

ten, depending on the size of your family, and then we divided up, and they had I'm sure the military gave us some tools to survive. Uh, went up to chop woods and stuff like that, branches to build huts on the island, at the bottom of the island, and we divided up and then we started there. I think maybe the locals in Indonesia heard about it and they came, and soon we started communicating with them, trading with them with, with jewelries, whatever it was, to survive. And I don't know the exact details, but I just remember the, the whole stay on the island was like a kid, if you've ever seen or read Robinson Crusoe, that's what it was like. I, I forgot home then, I forgot Vietnam. We're just trying to survive at that time, and it was fun because everything was new. And here's this, you know, island, un-untouched, very nice. We went up to the mountains. I always volunteered myself to go up there, started chopping trees, wood, small branches, started bringing things down, building. Went out fishing, I learned how to fish already at the end, and I think that all came to me when my dad passed away and we had to learn how to survive back home in Vietnam. So it came naturally to me to survive when we got on this island.

DePue: My guess is that the adults in the group, uh, were taking life a little more seriously than you and your cousin, huh?

Lam: Yes, yes. My cousins were younger, I was the oldest cousin in the group. I always volunteered to go up with my uncles to help out, and, it was just fun for me at that time.

DePue: We got a picture here, one picture that you have from Kuku Island, and over on the left of the picture you can see an arrow that I've got pointing. Who is that?

Lam: That is my uncle-in-law. I guess in America you say, "Uncle." Uh, he's married to my aunt. His was the one, his name is Tan Lam, he's the one who adopted me and I went with him. He's the one who had relative living in Port Arthur.

DePue: That picture, it looks rather idyllic.

Lam: Yeah, yeah, it, I don't know how we were able to get that picture and, and kept it for so long. But he was the head of the engineering, you know, group. He was in charge of getting irrigation, water, fresh water from upstream in the mountain, to get it down to the, the base of the mountain to the beach for us to use, just because it was surrounded by salt water.

DePue: It sounds, from what you described here, you guys are entirely on your own.

Lam: Yes, it's kinda like what they have now on TV. Survival. Throw a bunch of people on a deserted island and they have to find a way to feed, you know, feed themselves.

DePue: How long were you there then?

Lam: From what I can remember, eight to nine months, and then during that whole time, we became like a small village. We had, you know, shops set up. We all traded. There wasn't any currency, but we traded things that we made. Had a fresh bakery shop that was there, but, you know, everything was fresh, everything was made fresh. People became expert fishermen. The morning they would have people coming out there, and get some fish, come back, catch fish, come back, and then we would trade with them, you know, exchange work, at the time. And that was pretty much survival, on our own.

DePue: Did you have some gardens?

Lam: I don't think we did, just because, you know. We did go to other islands later on, you know, got friends with the locals, so we went island hopping to get things that we need, needed.

DePue: I would think rice would be one of the things you'd be looking for.

Lam: Yeah, I, I think so. I don't remember eating a lot of rice, but I remember bread. Bread was made, were made fresh on the island. You make a, I guess a little oven and bake that, but it was amazing. We had a lot of, uh, helicopter. Later on we built a landing pad on, on top of the mountain, the island. And helicopters I guess from, I'm not sure where from, United Nations or the Red Cross, they sent official on the island and then they started processing paperwork. So whenever the helicopter would come, they would bring food, canned food, and they would have cargo ship later to drop off canned food for us. And it could be some charity, you know, organization that did that.

DePue: Were there other refugees that were coming in after you guys got there?

Lam: Yes, after the first one, I don't know how long, it wasn't that much longer that I guess they realized that's where they were going to start the camp, so they started directing boats, that left Vietnam toward that island. And it, it grew, the population grew, as time went.

DePue: And you were one of the first ones there.

Lam: Yeah, yeah.

DePue: Well it does sound like, from your perspective, it was one of life's great adventures, huh?

Lam: Yeah, for me it was, yeah. I enjoyed it. You live free like a bird, you know, on this island. Back home, it was, you know, you live, in Saigon I was just living in a small place until we left. But on that island we just, I just kind of roamed the whole, whole island during that time.

- DePue: And you weren't going to school, were you?
- Lam: No, I don't remember. I don't think we had school set up for that.
- DePue: Was there any connection with your family back in Vietnam at that time?
- Lam: No, we lost connection completely. They probably had no idea if we survived or not, until we came to America and then we started sending letters back home.
- DePue: Was there any thought that you might just be left there for years?
- Lam: To be honest with you, I wasn't thinking about that. I was just enjoying my time. I'm sure my uncle, aunt and uncle would worry about that. But we saw the process as, as it went that people were coming, officials were coming on the island processing paperwork. Then they pick, like a lotto thing, it was like a lotto, they just pick a name of a family.
- DePue: Were these Indonesian officials, do you think?
- Lam: These were from America, from Canada, from other countries that were willing to help out with the, the refugee camp. One of my aunts and uncle, instead of going to America, they ended up going to Canada. We were lucky our sponsor was in Port Arthur, Texas, so we, we went to that, that location.
- DePue: That was the family's preference to go to America first?
- Lam: Everybody, I think everybody wanted to go to America, but, you know, any country, free country, is better than being back home in Vietnam.
- DePue: Okay. Well, after eight or nine months in Kuku Island, where to next?
- Lam: We got excited when we got chosen. We went to another island called Galang, G-A-L-A-N-G. And my pronunciation might be off, but that's the name of the island.
- DePue: We've got the map here, and that right at the top center we've got an arrow there of where Kuku Island was. And, you know, when I zoomed out of that, it quickly disappeared so it looks like it sits in the middle of the ocean there. But Galang Island is a little bit more prominent. It's a much more prominent island at the bottom of the screen there. And it's south of Singapore, but it's part of Indonesia?
- Lam: Uh, I, I guess so. I don't know exactly. But it was an upgrade to our living condition, you know, when we were, compared to Kuku.
- DePue: Well what were your conditions like in Galang Island?

Lam: They had sorta like, uh, barracks, you know. They had actually real wood. You know, you see two by fours build barracks, and we had bunk beds where you can, each family would put in a group. Water was fresh, they didn't, we didn't have to go up to the mountains to get anything. It was already there. The food was better, more supplied food there. We were transported from Kuku to Galang on a big, I think it was a cargo ship of some sort. I remember any time we see a big ship going by Kuku, it was an exciting moment because we know somebody's gonna get transported to a nice place. So, yeah, that, that moment that our family, our group was selected it's like winning the lottery every time.

DePue: Were there people that left on Kuku Island when you guys left?

Lam: When I left there were, and there were more people arriving after we left. I heard later that they had to shut down the island because it was just overpopulated. And some people were not that fortunate. They were sent back home, we were told, and this was in, probably in the 80s when they wanted to shut down that, that flux, influx of immigrants coming out.

DePue: How long were you in Galang Island then?

Lam: I think probably about a month, if my memory's correct a month or so. And then after that we went to Singapore.

DePue: What was going on in, in Galang when you were there then? Processing and paperwork?

Lam: Again, just a waiting period for things to get, you know, things to get processed. Then we ran into a lot of our neighbors on, from Kuku who came later as well. So it was just an ongoing process, week after week, however they wanted to get that through. It was kind of nice to get to see some old familiar faces from Kuku coming in, so it's just kind of moving in from stage one, one step at a time.

DePue: Now you probably didn't have a lot of direct dealings yourself, but how would you describe the, the relations that, that the Vietnamese had with all of these officials? Did the officials treat the Vietnamese with respect? Were they kind?

Lam: Yes, yes, it was I think the early, early phase or early period of that, that immigrant refugee from Vietnam. We were taken care of very, very, you know, very nicely. I think it was later when things got really out of control, that Vietnamese realized that, "Hey! You can get there, and when you get there you go to a nice place." Uh, that's when it's oversaturated, that's when things got a little bit, hectic. And, you know, but during my period of travel it was a nice, nice transition.

DePue: From Galang, next was Singapore, you mentioned?

Lam: Yes, from Galang, Singapore I don't – I, probably just a week the most we stayed in Singapore. And then after Singapore, it was to America for us, for our family group.

DePue: How did you get to America?

Lam: I believe it was by plane. From Singapore to America it was by plane.

DePue: A commercial airline.

Lam: It was a big plane.

DePue: With stewardesses and the whole works.

Lam: Yeah, I guess, I don't remember. I remember just, you know, getting a trip, maybe I was just overwhelmed with all the events. I remember getting off the plane, I remember it was being very cold. And I was told, and I think if we checked maybe they would have it, San Francisco is where we first landed in America. And it was cold weather compared to the tropics.

DePue: What were your other impressions of landing in America after dreaming about it for so long?

Lam: So long. I remember staying at this processing housing area, and they brought out, for the first time, chicken for me because we were eating fish on that island the whole time. Not a lot of poultry, meat. So it was, I remember something like barbecued chicken with white rice and an apple again, but it was the most delicious meal that I could have ever tasted. It was just really, really good. The cold weather, they gave us, actually I think it was churches around the area, they gave us coat, gave us warm clothes to wear, organizations that participated and help out as well. Everything was just big. America, the language, the people, when I first came.

DePue: And from San Francisco?

Lam: From San Francisco we went on a smaller plane, our family to go reunite with our sponsor, which was my uncle, uncle's, you know, relatives, his dad and his brother in Port Arthur, Texas.

DePue: How would you describe Port Arthur?

Lam: Definitely I remember getting into the neighborhood, you know, meeting these new, these new people I haven't met before, and just kinda get along, keep my senses all, you know, all there. Food was different, everything was plentiful. They had fridge. They had, I remember getting to the house of my sponsor in Port Arthur, they had a digital clock, which I had never seen before. And they asked me to tell me, tell them what time it was, and I'm trying to, trying to figure out the time here. So growing up back home there

wasn't, you know, we didn't have watches and stuff like that back then. Everything was different. Cooking, you have gas to cook with, we cooked with woods, basically there, there wasn't any gas company that would, you know, be doing that back during the war. So a big difference. Uh, you're looking at third world and you're looking at really high, high living standards.

DePue: We've got a picture here of the family members. Is that basically the group that you left the country with in '79?

Lam: Yes, there, there's probably a couple in there that, that already came before us, and then they met up with us. This was, you know, my aunt and uncle and my cousins in there, but most of them are, are the same group that came.

DePue: If we can go back, maybe take a minute here and go back a couple pictures. There we go. Tell us who's, who we're looking at on the left of the picture.

Lam: Okay, the, the left picture show, from the left is my aunt, who adopted me, and then comes my cousin. So his name is the same as mine, Dan Lam. My aunt, she, she stay, you know, she stay in Texas for the summer. Then me, that's the kid in red. And then you have my youngest aunt, who was not married at the time. She came along, she was one of our members with the group. And then the other picture to the right is, is, again, my little cousin, who was, you know, like my brother growing up with him, the whole trip. This picture was taken, I believe the one on the left was taken on Galang, and so was the right as well. You can see the housing is a little different. You see roof, there's actually, you know, real roof there, as opposed to leaves on top, compared to Kuku.

DePue: And by that time you guys, your optimism must be soaring, compared to what you'd already gone through.

Lam: Oh yeah. I mean, we know we're home free, and it's just a matter of time to get ourselves educated, learn the language, but I just went wherever my aunt and uncle took me.

DePue: Who were your sponsors in the United States?

Lam: It was my uncle-in-law's dad and, and brother. Uh, you know, Tan Lam was his name. He was, if my memory's correct, he was a Navy Seal officer, so I think he left Vietnam before the end of the war because of the connection. So he established, he's already established his life in America before the fall of Saigon, before the end of the war, so that, that was our sponsor.

DePue: Do you remember having any concerns at all that you're going to a country that was overwhelmingly white and African-American, that you would be a very distinct minority once you got here?

Lam: Oh, that never occurred to, in my head. I was just happy that, that we made it, after, you know, that whole journey. And it was, everything, again, was overwhelming trying to learn. You could see, you know, currency was different, the money, people lived freely, there were cars. Didn't see cars back then, you know. Bicycle, or bikes, motorbikes, we saw that too in, in Texas. There were boats. And it was just big. You know, homes had big land, backyards. Then, looking at young kids with different hair color, so it was very, very, you know, it's an amazing experience that I saw.

DePue: Okay, well, I promised not to go too much farther because that's the other part of the other interview that you've already had. But I, I want to make sure we know what happened to the rest of the family that you left behind in Vietnam.

Lam: I was in America for about ten years. During that whole time my aunt and uncle, made me write letters home to my mom so that I can, you know, stay in touch with her and also keep the language. They didn't have Vietnamese as a second language back then until much later, when a lot more Vietnamese came to America. But, back, we were just trying to, my aunt and uncle went to school during that period, and after ten years they were able to sponsor the remainder of my family back home in Vietnam.

DePue: When did you start learning English?

Lam: I think right away, as soon as I came. We stayed for a short period of time in Port Arthur, Texas, until we met up with my other aunt and uncle who already came to America just probably months before us. And they were already living in Chicago at that time, and then they came to Texas. And then we all decided, my aunt and uncle, decided to let me go with my new family now, my, uncle and my aunt, a new one who didn't travel with us during the trip. So I went with them up to Chicago.

DePue: But it sounds like you didn't learn any English until you got to the United States?

Lam: Correct. English was not part of the language that was taught in Vietnam during that, that time.

DePue: Well what I want you to do now is to take about a minute and tell us what you're doing now with your life.

Lam: I'm currently the administrator, the director for Reflections Memory Care in Chatham. I was lucky enough to found my current company, which is Unique Home, it's the parent company in Charleston, Illinois. Reflections is an Alzheimer's dementia facility that help take care, and we're assisted living, we're not a nursing home. We help those who are need, who have, you know, unfortunate to have the disease that they do. And I love what I do. I believe in this opportunity in America, you have to do the best you can to survive. And

the American Dream is there, but you gotta work for it. You can't just sit there and expect it to come to your lap.

DePue: Well apparently you worked your way through medical school as well.

Lam: Yeah, I went to medical school. I got my degree, but I didn't, I wasn't happy doing, doing medicine, so, but I still enjoy taking care of, of, you know, patient residents. I went into, research for a while and was fortunate enough to find my, my new niche, I would say, my career path.

DePue: Okay, put you on the spot here then, Patrick. How would you say you identify yourself today? As a Vietnamese? A Vietnamese-American? Or an American?

Lam: I, you know, American, Vietnamese-American. For me, I always teach my kids, you know, Vietnam was dad's birthplace, but America is my home. And two of my girls were born here in America, so America is their home. So there's no distinction for me, you know, it's just wording. American, Vietnamese-American. Uh, American, for me, is American.

DePue: Any final comments for us then?

Lam: No, I think. I, I hope that a lot of the younger generation could look back and see how people struggle in third world country, and could see how lucky they are, how fortunate they are to be part of America. And I, you know, my people, the people I know, are very appreciative of America giving us the opportunity to start a new life in this country. And I can tell you that, there's no place like America. It's land of the free. And a lot of people sacrificed their life, even during the Vietnam War, as we look back. So that, for me speaks a lot. I would, you know, I became a US citizen in this country after ten years, and this is my home, and this is gonna be my girls' home from now on.

DePue: Thank you very much Patrick. I enjoyed it.

Lam: Thank you very much for having me here, and I appreciate very much for the time.

DePue: You bet. And thank you.