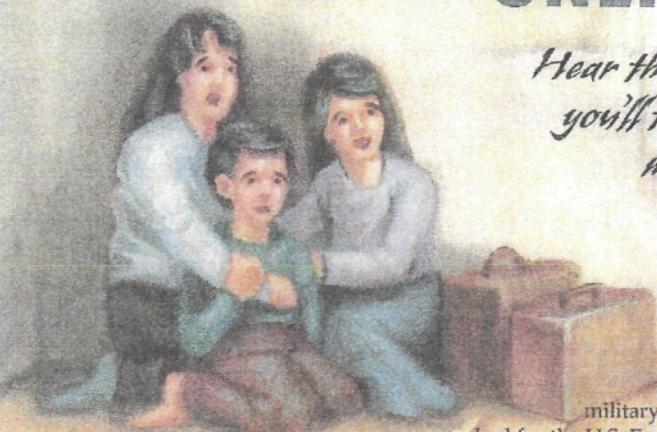


# Escape From Vietnam: ONLY THE BEGINNING

*Hear the life story of Chi Handorf and you'll think it's a script for a made-for-TV movie. But it's not.*

by Chi Handorf as told to Sandy Fiedler

*Sandy Fiedler*



**I** open my 1981 Spring Branch (Houston) High School yearbook and once again show my 9-year-old daughter, Brittni, the photograph of then-Vice President George Bush and me. He's congratulating me for winning state honors for the National History Day competition.

At our meeting in Houston, I was touched by Mr. Bush's warmth and interest in my story. As we talked, it became clear that he already knew all about me. When he was about to drive away in the limousine, his secret service agent ran back to give me Mr. Bush's personal pen. To a high school sophomore, this meant a lot. At Mr. Bush's invitation, our team toured the White House when we competed in Washington D.C.

The topic for National History Day that year was "Comparing Work and Leisure in the United States and in Vietnam." As I think of Vietnam, memories of my childhood return and once again I tell my daughter my history—her history.

## Looking Back

I was 11 years old in 1975. Because my stepfather was high-ranking in the

Vietnamese military and my mother worked for the U.S. Embassy in Saigon, both were on the list to be beheaded by the communists. On the day that we fled for our lives, my parents, uncle and I hurried to the airport in Saigon. As we waited, bombs started to fall. All night we heard the SNAP, SNAP, SNAP of gunfire back and forth. Ear-piercing whistles were followed by the explosions. The airplane scheduled to take us out of the country had been bombed.

The next morning we walked outside the airport into the masses of disoriented people. I was separated from my parents. The whistle of a bomb seared the air. I dived into a shallow hole.

"Oh, God!" I prayed, "If a bomb drops on me, just let me die. Don't let me lose an arm or a leg." Just then, someone pulled me up. My uncle had found me. He ran back into the airport with me dangling against him, my arm covering my eyes against the horror around me.

All day we waited, watching the rain, not knowing what to expect. I had brought two suitcases, but to my dismay my mother said urgently, "They told us we can't carry any luggage with us. There won't be any room. Go through your things and stuff whatever you can into your shirt."

Quickly I selected two pajama-type

oufits. The only mementos I still have of that day are an orange hand-knit sweater my mother had given me as a present the previous winter and a few photographs she happened to have in her wallet.

Large helicopters started to come in to take families to ships. When the next-to-last helicopter was ready to load up, someone asked my father, "How many are in your family?"

"Four," he answered. It was our turn. My suitcases, my friends and relatives, my home, and in some ways my dignity and identity were left behind that day.

The helicopter right behind us loaded up with passengers and started to rise. Suddenly we heard screams, "It's falling! It's falling!" It had been caught in the crossfire.

I looked down from my place of freedom in the air at the nightmare below. The airport looked like a tornado had hit it—clothes and debris were strewn everywhere. I hadn't even gotten to say goodbye to my family and friends who remained.

## This Is Freedom?

The helicopter took us to a large ship, which proved to be inadequate for the task of transporting refugees. Due to chronic engine trouble, it took almost two months for us to get to Guam.