



Turning ten years of horror into a lifetime of peace

Mr Vo Dai Ton

Mr Vo Dai Ton's Story

A senior and highly respected member of the Vietnamese community in Australia, Mr Vo Dai Ton is a former army Colonel from the Republic of Vietnam (commonly known as South Vietnam), as well as a poet, author and human rights activist.

When the South Vietnamese Government fell into the hands of the invading North Vietnamese communist forces, Mr Vo and his wife Mai escaped to Malaysia in an overcrowded and un-seaworthy fishing boat. They were accepted as political refugees and settled in Sydney the following year.

In the early 1980s, Mr Vo decided to return to Vietnam to form a coalition of anti-communist resistance forces. Mr Vo was captured and imprisoned in many notorious jails of the so-called Bamboo Gulag for more than 10 years. For most of the time, he was tortured and kept in the total darkness of solitary confinement.

From these horrors, Mr Vo has rebuilt his life. His life now embodies a respect for all humans and a passion for peace, love and human rights. He shares how an indomitable spirit enabled him to survive what no human being should have to endure..

The sufferings of my life are a small drop of water in the ocean compared with my people and others in the 21st Century. Human rights violations are everywhere and still going on. And in Vietnam too."

"This room is warm because we share feelings and a respect for human rights. I'm proud and happy to stand up here, having come from the bottom of hell. I was in isolation for ten years because I love Vietnam and human rights.

I was tortured like a dog. 96 times there was blood all over the cell. In isolation a problem is how to communicate with other prisoners? I was in a 2m x 3m cell, for ten years, three months and eleven days. I bathed per once a month for 5 minutes in summer. In winter I had a 5 minute bath every 3 months. To eat, I was given 1 bowl of rice with salt per day. I was given nothing to read."

Mr Vo said he had two very special people to present: "The lady who supports my cause, waited 12 years for me, not knowing if I was alive, waited in Australia, my wife Mai. The second person is very important, my computer teacher, my assistant, [and young grandson] Albert Hall".

Acknowledging that 15 minutes can't possibly capture his 72 years on earth, Mr Vo went on to say: "My mother sang me to sleep amid gun fire. Eleven years in prison, no English, therefore I use my language from the heart, ...we are different, from different parts of the world, have a different language, but all our blood is red. We have the same feelings, respect for human rights."

Mr Vo sadly revealed that his mother was killed in the war when he was 10 years old. His father told him: "Evil will win if good people do nothing. We [the people at this Conference] are trying to do something. All good people have to do something. [The] value of a man is in his heart".

He lamented that violations of human rights are everywhere. As an example, he said, "Here's a short story from 26 years ago: this is about communications in prison versus technology". "They gave me a pen and paper to write my confession. I had nothing to confess. So I threw the paper down and managed to tear off a little

piece of it. I wrote the address of my wife in Sydney on it. I knew that my neighbour was soon to be released so I wanted to give it to him so he could let her know I was still alive. So when I was let out for five minutes I threw the bit of paper over into his cell but it got caught on the wire at the top of the fence. I knew that if the guard saw it I would be killed, so I said a prayer to my mother to please help me. When I opened my eyes a little bird flew down and took the paper in its beak and flew away.

Why this story? Human rights violations happen because of a lack of communication in the world. People don't know what is happening. They (the communist party) block everything. In Vietnam now there are 600 newspapers, radio and TV stations but they are all communist. There is no international communication. So now and then is not so different."

Mr Vo indicated that when he was in prison, he was accused of working for the CIA and China. "So when I was captured I invented a story, I combined the names of movie stars Clark Gable and Robert Taylor, to make Robert Clark a man I was dealing with. It was a way to survive.

After the Iron Curtain there was the Bamboo Curtain in Vietnam. This involved the same system as in the USSR. They used violence and deception to control people. You can't talk about human rights in Vietnam. You'll be arrested if caught. Tiananmen Square was an example of people power, as was the peaceful Buddhist protest in Rangoon. Even now in Hanoi and Saigon demonstrators are arrested.

A Catholic priest tried to raise human rights issues in Vietnam. He was gagged. In 2007, 7 months ago! This is happening now. There is no religious freedom in

Vietnam". In Brisbane on a billboard beside the highway we erected a poster of the priest being tried as a way of advocating.

In 1981 I was 72kg, in 1991 [as a result of imprisonment] I was 38kg. But this is a small drop; the huge ocean is my people's suffering under a dictatorship."

So what now? We must try to share and support what others are doing, in Africa, Asia, and the whole world. Support those who have been to hell. Stop the killing; we have no right to kill anyone. There is too much suffering in war. When I was in the war there were 12 men who volunteered for a special mission. Of those, 9 died, one lost his legs and is a beggar in Vietnam, one disappeared and then there is me. I lost everything.

"[I] came to Australia via a fishing boat. They called us boat people. I was not born on a boat. They tried to label us, change our race to 'boat people'."

Despite an unbelievably arduous life and a nasty welcome from some sections of the community, Mr Vo is happy in Australia.

"When I was walking around Sydney I saw a small, dried up plant that someone had thrown away. I felt like that, but Australia has tolerance, and freedom. I took the plant home and put it in some water and eventually a flower grew out of it. This is how I feel".

The flower of human rights comes from us and our support. I'm an old soldier, not a lecturer, but my experience can be shared with you. I'm not fighting with hatred now. I'm fighting with love. If I saw my enemy today I would invite him out to look at the children playing in the park in Australia, because that is what is important." ■