

PRAISE FOR *WHERE THE WIND LEADS*

“Desperation. Overwhelming odds. Heroic rescue. This story has all the elements of great fiction. But it is not fiction; it is real life. The account of Dr. Chung and his family will inspire you to believe in second chances and miracles and the God who gives them both.”

—MAX LUCADO

New York Times BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

“I love true stories, and Dr. Chung’s is the best I’ve read in a long time. It’s packed full of family drama, plus really engaging recent world history, and it is woven from beginning to end with the consistent theme of God’s sovereign mercy. This kind of real-life rescue story makes reality television pale by comparison!”

—LISA HARPER

AUTHOR AND WOMEN OF FAITH® SPEAKER

“*Where the Wind Leads* is an incredible adventure story of loss and survival, rescue and resilience. Once I started to read it, I simply could not put it down. It’s a fascinating account of family life in warring Vietnam, but even more so it’s an amazing tale of how God’s grace can bring an individual, and a family, from certain death to flourishing life.”

—LEIGHTON FORD

PRESIDENT, LEIGHTON FORD MINISTRIES

WHERE THE WIND LEADS

A REFUGEE FAMILY'S MIRACULOUS STORY
OF LOSS, RESCUE, AND REDEMPTION

VINH CHUNG
WITH TIM DOWNS



W PUBLISHING GROUP

AN IMPRINT OF THOMAS NELSON

Where the Wind Leads

© 2014 Vinh Chung

All rights reserved. No portion of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, scanning, or other—except for brief quotations in critical reviews or articles, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Published in Nashville, Tennessee, by W Publishing, an imprint of Thomas Nelson.

Published in association with the literary agency of Alive Communications, Inc., 7680 Goddard Street, Suite 200, Colorado Springs, CO 80920.
www.alivecommunications.com.

Thomas Nelson titles may be purchased in bulk for educational, business, fund-raising, or sales promotional use. For information, please e-mail SpecialMarkets@ThomasNelson.com.

Quotations in chapter 37 are reprinted with permission of the *American Legion Magazine*, © June 2013. www.legion.org.

The photograph of Clifford Pier is believed to have been taken in the early 1960s or late 1950s and is from *Memories of Singapore*, <http://www.singap.co.uk>.

Map Design: Kelsey Downs. All maps used are public domain.

Scripture quotations marked *esv* are from the English Standard Version. © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers.

Scripture quotations marked *NLT* are from Holy Bible, New Living Translation. © 1996, 2004, 2007. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Wheaton, Illinois 60189. All rights reserved.

978-0-8291-0554-7 (IE)

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
is available upon request: LCCN 2013039729**

ISBN 978-0-8499-4756-8

Printed in the United States of America

14 15 16 17 18 RRD 6 5 4 3 2 1

*For my mother and father:
Thank you for your courage and sacrifice.*

CONTENTS

Foreword by Richard Stearns xi

PART ONE

1. The Story Begins. 3

2. A World on the Edge 5

3. A Handful of Rice 13

4. Building an Empire. 19

5. The Prince of Bac Lieu. 27

6. Assisted Marriage 33

7. The Dragon Lady 43

8. Deception 53

9. A Nation Falls 63

10. The Farm. 73

11. Gathering Storm 83

12. Why Me?. 91

13. No Turning Back. 99

CONTENTS

PART TWO

14. First Days at Sea	109
15. Pirates	117
16. One Man's Burden	125
17. Land at Last	133
18. Blood on the Sand	141
19. Sheltering Angels	149
20. The Beach	155
21. Betrayed	161
22. <i>Seasweep</i> Sets Sail	169
23. Endless Sea	175
24. The Prayer	183
25. Rescue	191
26. Singapore Bound	201
27. 25 Hawkins Road	207
28. Across the Pacific	215

PART THREE

29. Waking Up in America	225
30. Allied Gardens	231
31. Starting School	237
32. Grand Avenue	243
33. The Factory	249
34. The American Dream	255
35. Peer Pressures	261
36. The Restaurant	269
37. Ghosts of the Past	277

CONTENTS

38. Flying Blind 283

39. Aiming for the Stars 291

40. Boy Meets Girl 299

41. Special Good Friend 307

42. Harvard 317

43. Love Story 325

44. Cap and Gown 333

45. Giving Back 339

Acknowledgments 349

About the Author 353

FOREWORD

A FEW YEARS AGO A YOUNG DERMATOLOGIC SURGEON contacted me with something important to say. Over the phone that day, Vinh Chung told me one of the most amazing stories I had ever heard. This story is so precious to me because, as the president of World Vision US, I work to change the lives, literally, of millions of children every day. But I rarely hear the rest of the story thirty years later. The story of Vinh Chung is what I hope and pray for every vulnerable child.

The story you are about to read is the one I was told. It is the thrilling account of Vinh Chung and his family's harrowing journey from Vietnam to the South China Sea to the Deep South in Arkansas and eventually to the halls of Harvard. It is the story of a family who faced political persecution, who were forced to leave behind everything they had and take incredible risks to start a new life. Vinh's family, miraculously, began their new life from scratch, relying on their resilience and determination, learning a new language and starting new jobs. And then Vinh and his brothers and sisters achieved far more than most families ever dream for their children. You'll also see that Vinh and his family couldn't have made this journey alone. All along the way good people, and many good Christians, intervened with a helping hand.

FOREWORD

In 1979, as the new communist regime in Vietnam consolidated its power, families fled by boat in search of a new home. Yet when the lives of hundreds of thousands of these “boat people” hung in the balance, most of the world decided to look away. Governments, politicians, and citizens wanted to forget the tragedy in the South China Sea.

But World Vision’s president, Stan Mooneyham, believed he must do something. He believed that God hadn’t turned His face from those who were suffering. So Mooneyham wouldn’t allow the world to turn away. When he couldn’t get others to help, he set out onto the open seas himself. Mooneyham believed that God didn’t create any throwaway children—that we cannot look away when people are suffering.

As you read and when you’ve finished reading this book, I hope you’ll reflect on the bigger picture. We live in a world where hundreds of millions of children like Vinh Chung have been driven from their homes in the last two decades.

Even now, at this moment, children are being driven from their homes in places like Syria, Central African Republic, and the Philippines. Today there are twenty million children living in refugee camps, tent cities, and other temporary shelters. And they are not throwaways either.

A few months ago I sat with refugee children from Syria. They had fled their country, forced to leave by the fighting in their cities. Their homes destroyed, their parents killed, they left simply for the chance to stay alive. Now their future hangs in the balance. Will they have the opportunity to grow up healthy and go to school and live ordinary lives?

Vinh’s is the story of one—the incredible potential locked inside one refugee child. But it’s also the story of every child in the world who is poor, forgotten, and abused, a refugee. It’s a story that shows there is no such thing as a throwaway child.

Thirty years ago Stan Mooneyham did something outrageous because he believed that every child is precious and that God has created each of them with potential and gifts and talents. Among

our staff at World Vision today, Mooneyham's resolve still resonates as an example of the lengths we must go to make good on our belief that every child is precious. What he did—to be frank—was reckless. Yet because Mooneyham wouldn't ignore these children, neither could the politicians who wanted to look the other way.

Mooneyham was only one link in a whole chain of actions that saved Vinh's life, the lives of his family, and hundreds, perhaps thousands, of others. It required a number of individuals, often strangers, who decided to do something, including the little Lutheran church in Arkansas that chose to adopt a large family of refugees from Vietnam.

Today, when we read in a newspaper about a famine or we watch as diplomats argue about how to resolve an international crisis, it is easy to think that such troubles are too difficult to fix. It is easy to feel helpless in the midst of a complex catastrophe. But the remarkable story told in this book is proof that we can turn the tide. We can shift the world's attention to those who are suffering. We may not be in charge of a global charity, but we can write letters to members of Congress; we can raise awareness online and in social media; we can donate to worthy causes.

Whatever you do on behalf of the world's forgotten, it can make a difference for generations. Today, because a few people did what they could, Vinh Chung is saving lives as a surgeon and as a World Vision donor. He is also now helping to lead our ministry after I invited him to become a board member. It's only fitting, after all, to have someone like Vinh, who can remind us that there truly are no throwaway children.

Don't ever underestimate the difference you can make in the life of one person. What if Nelson Mandela had died in a refugee camp, Mother Teresa had been forced into an early marriage, or Gandhi had died as a child for lack of clean water? One small act today can lead to another and another. Like a line of dominoes, where each one plays a minor but essential role, we can each play a part. It may only take one act to save one life that can change the course of history.

—Richard Stearns, Bellevue, Washington

Part One

*The winds of heaven change suddenly;
so do human fortunes.*

—CHINESE PROVERB



One

THE STORY BEGINS

THIS IS A STORY TOO BIG FOR ONE PERSON TO TELL.

It's a story that spans two continents, ten decades, and eleven thousand miles. It's the story of a fortune lost and a treasure found, the story of two lost men and three extraordinary women who changed their lives.

My name is Vinh Chung. I was born in a country that no longer exists and grew up in a country I never knew existed.

I was born in South Vietnam just eight months after its fall to the communists in April 1975. But this is not a story about the Vietnam War—this is the story of what happened next, to more than a million people, including my family. For most Americans the final image of the Vietnam War was a grainy black-and-white photograph of an overloaded helicopter lifting off from the rooftop of the United States Embassy in Saigon. When that helicopter departed, my story began.

When I was three and a half years old, my family was forced to leave Vietnam and flee to a place we had never heard of, somewhere in the heartland of America, called Arkansas.

I am a refugee.

My family went to sleep in one world and woke up in another,

WHERE THE WIND LEADS

and more than anyone in my family I was trapped between those worlds. I was born in Vietnam, but I was not Vietnamese; I was raised in America, but I was not an American. I grew up Asian in character but American in culture, a citizen but always a refugee. I had no lessons from the past to guide me, no right way to do things in the present, and no path to follow into the future.

Since I was so young when I left Vietnam, I never really had the chance to understand Asian culture or master the Vietnamese language. I grew up in America, where there was a new culture and a new language to learn, but there was no one to help me because no one in my family had been there before me. We were all lost and had to find our own way in America, and it was hard for each of us in a different way.

We are Chinese by ancestry, born in Vietnam, and raised in the jungles of America. We arrived in this country with nothing but the clothes on our backs and unable to speak a single word of English; my family now holds twenty-one university degrees, including five master's and five doctorates from institutions such as Harvard, Yale, Georgetown, Stanford, George Mason, Michigan, and Arkansas.

But in July 1979, my family lay half-dead from dehydration in a derelict fishing boat jammed with ninety-three refugees lost in the middle of the South China Sea.

How we got from there to here is quite a story.

Two

A WORLD ON THE EDGE

Within ten years of my father's birth, fifty million human beings died. He was born at a moment in history when the entire world was about to erupt in a frenzy of violence that left no one untouched.

My father's name is Thanh Chung; he was born in 1937 in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam. When my father was born, an emperor still ruled Vietnam, the nation was still a French colony, and communism was mostly an obscure political theory discussed by radical students in Paris.

It was a world that would soon cease to exist.

In 1937, Japan was already at war with China, Adolf Hitler was about to invade Poland, Britain and France were about to declare war on Germany, and the United States was desperately trying to maintain a fragile neutrality that was destined to fail. The earth's great powers were shifting like tectonic plates, and entire nations were about to be thrown off their feet by the resulting quake. Ancient loyalties were realigning; longtime friends became foes, and former enemies were forced to unite to survive. Chancellors and prime ministers spoke of thousand-year empires and mustered massive armies in pursuit of their dreams. Rapidly industrializing countries lusted for

raw materials like oil and iron and rubber and overran neighboring nations to obtain them. All over the world soldiers and civilians alike began to perish in unimaginable numbers, and only a few fortunate nations managed to escape the violence and devastation.

Vietnam was not one of them.

One day, when my father was four years old, he heard the drone of an engine high above him and looked up into the sky to see a formation of cross-shaped silhouettes drifting overhead. They were the first airplanes he had ever seen, but these were no ordinary airplanes. They were Japanese long-range bombers being redeployed from China to air bases in southern Indochina, where they would be within easy striking distance of Malaya, the Philippines, and the Dutch East Indies. When America saw that Japan was extending its ambitions deeper into Southeast Asia, it immediately imposed an embargo that cut off Japan's supply of iron and oil—two resources vital to any industrialized nation. Japan was left with only two options: either withdraw its armies from Southeast Asia or eliminate America's ability to enforce its embargo. Japan chose the latter option by launching a sneak attack against a little-known American naval base, known as Pearl Harbor.

My father was witnessing the beginning of the Second World War.

The next forty years of his life would be a time of unceasing conflict as violently opposing powers battled to decide who would own Vietnam. The Japanese wanted to conquer it, the French wanted to keep it, and the communists wanted to overthrow it.

My father just wanted peace.

The Mekong Delta is a fifteen-thousand-square-mile river delta formed by the nine tributaries of the Mekong River, known to the Vietnamese as the "Nine Dragons." To Asians the dragon is a symbol of prosperity and good fortune, and the Mekong Delta has the very good fortune to possess nine of them. For thousands of years the waters of the Mekong have regularly flooded to deposit layer after layer of mineral-rich silt from as far away as the Tibetan plateau, creating some of the richest soil on earth. The fertile soil and tropical savanna climate make the region perfectly suited for agriculture,

which, unfortunately for the region's inhabitants, has also made the Mekong Delta an object of desire for nations all over the world.

My father lived with his older brother and four sisters in the countryside near the provincial capital of Bac Lieu. His father—my grandfather—had two brothers, who also lived in Bac Lieu, and together the three Chung brothers ran a lucrative business. My grandfather was a seller of medicinal herbs and traditional Chinese remedies, while my grandmother sold fabrics imported from Saigon a hundred miles to the north. Business was good for my family in Bac Lieu; and for a family of merchants, when business is good, life is good.

By temperament my father was a kind and gentle boy who adored his father and mother and wanted nothing more than to live his life peacefully in the pastoral beauty of the delta. Unfortunately the peace he longed for was something he rarely experienced.

When he was five, he looked up from his chores one day to see a band of unfamiliar men walking toward him through the center of his village. The men were muttering to one another in voices too low to hear, and when one of them raised his arm to point to one of the houses, my father saw that the man was holding a long, silver-gray machete. The blade was stained red.

No—it was *dripping* red.

These were the men his mother and father called *Khmer*—the dark-skinned men who came from unknown villages somewhere to the northwest. My father had heard grown-ups whisper stories about the Khmer, but whenever he asked about them, he was told that he was too young to hear. But late at night his older brother used to tell him stories—stories about the vicious, dark-skinned men who hated the Vietnamese so much that they would use their machetes to hack off their arms and sever their heads and burn whole villages to the ground. My father had always thought his brother was lying, just making up ghost stories to watch his little brother's eyes widen with fear—but now he knew the men were real.

And they were looking directly at him.

He wanted to run, but his legs would not obey him. The men had the eyes of tigers—that mythical, paralyzing stare said to be

able to hold a boy frozen in place until the beast devoured him. He couldn't move; there was nothing he could do but stand and wait to be torn apart.

The men gathered around my father and stared down at him. One of the men took a step closer and said something, but my father could not understand the man's words and said nothing in reply. The man cocked his head to one side and studied him for a moment, then raised his machete and pointed to my father's head. My father held his breath and wondered what it was going to feel like to have his head chopped off. *Will I still be able to see?* he wondered. *Will I feel it when my head drops to the ground like a coconut?*

The man made a comment to one of his companions, then pointed his machete at my father's left arm and drew an imaginary line from his shoulder to his hand. *Is he going to hack off my arm instead? Would it be better to lose my arm or my head? Which one hurts more?* He squeezed his eyes tight and waited for the stinging blow.

Then he heard the door to his house squeak open behind him, and when he turned, he saw his father hurry from the house and call out to the men in a frightened voice that didn't sound like his father at all. Then, to my father's amazement, my grandfather stepped aside and pointed to the door.

The men nodded and entered the house one by one, and as each one entered, he bent down and leaned his bloodstained machete against the wall.

My father entered last of all and watched as the men seated themselves around the small room. His older brother and sisters pressed themselves against the far wall and stared, wide-eyed, as my grandmother nervously ladled out bowls of rice and *pho* and passed them to her husband to distribute to the hungry men.

Half an hour later the meal was finished, and the men departed. As they left, each man retrieved his machete from the side of the house—except for one. One machete was left leaning against the wall, with its bloodstained tip glowing like a torch. My father was fascinated by the machete and reached down to pick it up, but when he did, my grandfather grabbed his arm and jerked him back.

“Never touch that machete,” my grandfather said sternly. “Never touch the blade and never, *ever* move it from that spot.”

My grandfather’s solemn tone told my father that this was not a command to be questioned. As always, he obeyed, and the blood-tipped machete remained against the wall exactly where it had been left.

My father was too young to understand that his family had just served a sort of Passover meal. The Cambodian angels of death who dined at our house that day had just finished slaughtering a group of communist sympathizers and were passing through my family’s village, searching for any others they might have missed.

For more than a thousand years, the Mekong Delta was ruled by the Chinese. For the previous hundred years the French had been in charge, laying claim to Vietnam as an official “colony of economic interests” and growing rich off the sale of its rice, rubber, coffee, and tea. When Japan invaded Vietnam at the beginning of the Second World War, communist leader Ho Chi Minh founded the League for the Independence of Vietnam, commonly known as the Viet Minh. Their initial purpose was to repel the Japanese, but their ultimate goal was to free Vietnam from all foreign oppressors, which led them to hate the French almost as much as they did the Japanese.

The Cambodians who dined at my father’s house that day supported the colonialist French and despised the communist Viet Minh. My father’s family had been spared a violent death because they were Chinese, and the Chinese were considered a neutral party to the conflict. Neutrality was a blessing, but it was also a difficult and dangerous balance to maintain. By feeding the Cambodians, my grandfather had won their favor—but an act of kindness to the Cambodians would have been viewed as an act of betrayal to the Viet Minh. The blood-tipped machete left leaning against their wall told other Cambodians that the family should be spared, but the Viet Minh would not have felt the same way. No matter what course of action my family took, someone could have been offended, and that meant their lives were in constant danger.

Random violence was a constant danger in Bac Lieu, and after my family's house had been burned to the ground twice, my grandmother decided she had had enough. After all, she was raising six children, and the rural delta was just too dangerous. She began to press her husband to relocate the family near the city of Soc Trang in Soc Trang province, about thirty miles north. They would be safer near a city, she insisted, and there would also be better education for the children there. My grandfather was reluctant to leave Bac Lieu because his business had prospered there, but eventually he relented and moved his family while his two brothers remained behind to protect the family property.

But the violence soon followed them.

After victory over the Japanese, nationalist sentiment was strong in Vietnam, and the communist Viet Minh were hurrying to attack the French before they had time to reconsolidate power. In Soc Trang the French were everywhere; there were French soldiers, French gendarmes, and French bureaucrats, and that made the region a target for Viet Minh attacks. Looting and assault became so common in Soc Trang that my grandfather found it almost impossible to conduct business there.

In the months that followed, things grew even worse for my family. Business slowed to a standstill, and the money they had saved from Bac Lieu was gone. Now the only way they could survive was by selling off their possessions, and the Viet Minh had already stolen the best of them.

Then on top of it all, my grandfather received the tragic news from Bac Lieu that one of his brothers had been killed in the recent uprising. His other brother had vanished without a trace and was presumed dead. This was the final straw in a lifetime of difficulties.

My grandfather fell into a deep depression fueled by alcohol. At times his gloom was so dark and overpowering that he became suicidal. In moments of deepest despondency he would sometimes race up to the rooftop to throw himself off, and my father and uncle would have to hold him back to keep him from jumping and ending his life. My grandfather's depression slowly descended into utter despair, and

over the next three years the family could only watch as my grandfather withered like a drying leaf until he finally crumbled and died.

My father was only twelve when it happened.

At forty-one, my grandmother had been left to raise six children all by herself. Her children were poor and hungry, and all that had been left to her was the burned-out shell of a French colonial house. She had no money, no job, little education, and no one to help her. A forty-one-year-old woman with six children had virtually no prospect of remarriage; the only two options for a woman in her situation were servitude or prostitution, and she was too proud to do either. She faced an almost impossible challenge, the kind of Herculean task that would crush most men.

So Grandmother Chung rolled up her sleeves and went to work.