

Determined to escape

By Sarah Anne Carter
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"I saw the Communist tank waiting for me as my ship went out."

Father Joseph Philip Minh Vu remembers April 30, 1975, like it was yesterday, but it was the day he escaped from Vietnam.

As a law student, he was aware of international politics in 1973 and knew what would happen in his country when the U.S. troops left.

"I prepared the family," he said. "We had to go."

Vu's family starting planning to leave the country – not a small feat for a family with 12 children that also wanted to include the in-laws of one of his sisters.

Plan A: Send sister to Paris

"We had a plan to take the family to France, so we sent my sister to school in Paris," Vu said. However, while they were working the French connection, the fall came.

Plan B: Work with U.S. government

Vu had a sister working for Beacons Moving and Storage, so they asked them to consider their family when they pulled out, and they agreed. The plan involved splitting the family in two and rendezvousing with a truck where they would be put in boxes and taken to the airport. The first rendezvous was in the morning and Vu led the group for the afternoon rendezvous.

However, in the afternoon, the truck never showed up. It had been stopped during an earlier run, searched and the driver and people in the truck were arrested and the truck was seized.

Plan C: The sea

Vu went to go buy or rent a ship to take his family out via the sea, but that option was deterred very quickly as the main bridge that connected Saigon was blown up.

"I went home very disappointed," Vu said. "I looked at other areas until I was exhausted."

Plan D: Make peace and stay

"I was ready to give up," Vu said. "But, anticipating what may happen later when the communists took over, I wanted to make peace with the communist propaganda."

Vu decided to throw a party at his house and invited people he had engaged in discussions on communism before.

"You saw me looking for a way out, but I'm not now," he told them. "I'm here now, if you need me, you can use my services."

Plan E: Obey

"This is the hand of God in it," Vu said. "In the middle of the night, I heard the voice, 'Minh, I want you to go.'"

He woke up, but didn't see anyone, so he went up to his roof. There were shootings happening all over Saigon. He waited until morning to come down and checked the news on BBC London

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Kelly Tippet/Dispatch Staff

Lt. Col. Joseph Vu, wing chaplain at Columbus Air Force Base, escaped the Communist regime in Saigon, Vietnam, in 1975. He was ordained as a priest in 1980 and entered the United States Air Force Chaplaincy in 1986. He has served in Columbus since June 2004.