

## BACKBENCHER'S NIGHTMARE BOAT TRIP FROM VIETNAM

# Pirates raped women, stole motor and left us all to die

ADAM LANGENBERG  
POLITICAL REPORTER

**T**UNG Ngo has come a long way since fighting Thai pirates in his sleep while on board a refugee ship in the South China Sea.

The Labor Upper House MP, who fled Vietnam with his pregnant older sister, Phuong, as a 10-year-old in 1981, thought he had no chance of survival when pirates took the motor out of the boat and left it taking on water and tied to a bamboo pole.

As night fell and the men scooping water out of the boat tired, a humanitarian boat plucked the desperate refugees from what would have surely become a graveyard.

"If it didn't we would have been finished because the boat was taking in water, and eventually all the blokes would be too tired to try to get the water out of the boat," Mr Ngo recalled to the *Sunday Mail*.

Thirty-seven years later, Mr Ngo is behind a push to build a 15m-long monument in the CBD, at the corner of Victoria Drive and Kintore Ave, honouring the Vietnamese boat people. He's raised about \$400,000 to build the monument, designed by Adelaide artists Tony Rosella and Ash Badios, which is set to be considered for planning approval by Adelaide City Council early next year.

One of 11 children, Mr Ngo spent 1½ years in a Philippines refugee camp before being granted residency in Australia, sponsored by another older sis-

ter, Dzung, who had already settled in South Australia. Sitting outside the Thebarton studio where the monument will be designed, Mr Ngo comes across as easygoing, but he also has a steely resolve.

That fighting spirit was best illustrated when the pirates took over his boat in 1981. Mr

ter, Dzung, who had already settled in South Australia. Sitting outside the Thebarton studio where the monument will be designed, Mr Ngo comes across as easygoing, but he also has a steely resolve.

Mr Ngo, a former Port Adelaide-Enfield councillor who studied teaching at university and worked briefly at schools before joining Labor MP Jack Snelling's office as a staffer, said his story was similar to most other Vietnamese boat people who settled in Adelaide.

His passion to honour those who made the same journey he did with a monument was stirred by a visit to western Sydney, where he noticed a boat-shaped statue.

"That gave me an idea, so when I went back to Adelaide I did a bit of research and saw that Adelaide was the only (mainland) state that didn't have a Vietnamese boat people monument," he said.

The next step to getting the project off the ground was getting the backing of Governor Hieu Van Le, a Vietnamese refugee who arrived in Adelaide in 1977.

But Mr Ngo wanted Adelaide's monument to be different to the rest scattered all over Australia – he wanted it to be focused on the future, rather than the past.

"I just want to really focus more on the positive, a celebration of the Vietnamese culture and how it transformed Australia," he said.

"I had a bit of a hard time at the beginning where the first generation (of refugees) wanted it a bit more about sorrow, a bit sad. It took me a bit of convincing, but when I told them that this is all about the next generation, your grandkids, they completely changed when I told them that."

Artist Ash Badios said the monument – planned to be 15m long, 4.5m wide and featuring a 3.3m-tall beacon – would be based on two children telling the story of their ancestors' journey to Australia.

"The two children, they have the story which has been passed on to them and they're telling the story while they're playing," Ms Badios said.

"It's through a positive action of play rather than an act of sadness and remembrance, but even then the importance of the story is not lost."

Mr Le said the moment would be a "powerful token of appreciation to the generosity of Australia and the Australian people".

"On the one hand, a monument would remind us of the tragedy and suffering of Vietnamese refugees," he said.

"On the other hand, it would also remind us of their bravery, resilience and contribution, and the triumph of the human spirit."



TRIBUTE: A concept design for an Adelaide monument to Vietnamese boat people.

Ngo said the pirates held the men at bay with machetes and took the women into the cabins overnight, where many were raped.

It led the traumatised 10-year-old – a frequent sleepwalker – to take a bold stand while fast asleep.

"I must have been traumatised because in the middle of the night I stood up and I challenged the pirates," he said.

"I didn't know all this but I could remember a little bit at the end because a bloke was holding me down.

"The next day all the pirates



**TELL US: Do you support a monument for Vietnamese boat people in Adelaide?**

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# SPARKS QUEST FOR NEW MEMORIAL IN CITY PARKLANDS



**LONG JOURNEY:** Labor MLC Tung Ngo with wife Kim and their children, Jayden, 7, and Jenson, 3; (above) Tung, second from right, with his family in 1975; (left) Vietnamese migrants arrive in Darwin in 1979. Main picture: MATT TURNER



## FLEEING FROM A DEADLY WAR ZONE

■ **MORE** than one million Vietnamese people fled as refugees after the North Vietnamese Army captured Saigon in 1975, with only about half of them surviving their journeys.  
 ■ **THE** first boatload of refugees fleeing Vietnam arrived at

Darwin Harbour on April 26, 1976.  
 ■ **THE** first Vietnamese refugees were flown to Australia in April 1975 as part of Operation Babylift, which flew 3000 infants to western countries.  
 ■ **ACCORDING** to the 2016

Census, 219,355 people in Australia were born in Vietnam.  
 ■ **IT** also showed 14,337 South Australians were born in Vietnam, 0.9 per cent of SA's population.  
 ■ **MONUMENTS** honouring Vietnamese boat people are in Sydney, Perth, Brisbane and

Melbourne. There are similar monuments around the world.  
 ■ **SOUTH** Australia's Vietnamese Boat People Monument Association was launched in 2017. It has secured \$200,000 of State Government funding to help build a monument.

