

Vietnamese Village in Puerto Princesa

Phung Nguyen

September 18, 2018

Prepared for Ms. Janet Fanaki

Puerto Princesa is the capital city of Palawan, the western most island of the Philippines. Puerto Princesa is 1328 km due East of Saigon and Palawan is the closest land for those boat people who chose to flee Vietnam from the coasts of central Vietnam.



Those Vietnamese boat people landed in Palawan in the 1980's were kept (temporarily) in a refugee camp known as [PFAC](#) (Philippine First Asylum Center) and known to the local people as [VRC](#) (Vietnamese Refugee Camp).

The camp was part of a land that belongs to the Philippine Western Command of the Armed Forces (WESCOM), adjacent to the (only) runway of Puerto Princesa airport, 5 km from downtown of Puerto Princesa. An aerial view of the camp taken in the late 1980's is shown on the right. At its peak, this camp accommodated more than 11,000 Vietnamese refugees.



The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and WESCOM [administered](#) PFAC from its beginning in late 1979 until [June 26 1996](#). They provided food and shelter for the Vietnamese boat people and processed their applications for re-settlement in a third country. PFAC was also assisted by the Center for Assistance to Displaced Persons (CADP), led by [Sister Pascale Le thi Triu](#), a Vietnamese nun living in the Philippines. For some reasons, by the end of 1995 more than 2500 boat people were determined not to be refugees and they were to be returned to Vietnam. On [February 14 1996](#) the Philippine government forcibly repatriated 89 Vietnamese boat people for fear of having to single-handedly shoulder the cost of maintaining the camp. The repatriation was met with strong protests by the refugees living in the camp; it also caused fear among them when the Philippine arm forces raided the camp for future repatriations.

Following the infamous repatriation in February 1996, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) requested the Philippine government to allow 2,710 Vietnamese refugees to remain in the Philippines indefinitely. On [July 17 1996](#), CBCP successfully

signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Philippine government to grant indefinite temporary residence status to the Vietnamese boat people living in the Philippines, and the right to apply for resettlement in a third country; the right to seek legal employment, to establish businesses, to attend local schools or universities and to travel freely in the Philippines.



In early August 1996, [Archbishop Ramón Cabrera Argüelles](#) on his way from Manila to a Catholic conference in Argentina stopped by Los Angeles and announced the news of July 2016 Memorandum of Understanding to the local Vietnamese community. Within 2 weeks, they organized musical concerts and other fund raising events to finally collect more than 1 million US dollars for donation to CBCP to help the “Remaining Vietnamese Nationals” living in the Philippines. The news quickly spread to Vietnamese communities in Canada and Australia. By the end of September 1996, donations on the order of 100,000 Canadian and Australian dollars reached the CBCP office in Manila. Some donors suggested dividing the donation fund equally to the number of the Vietnamese Nationals who registered with CBCP. However, CBCP came up with a long-term solution: to build a Vietnamese village in Palawan for the refugees to live together and to help each other. At the same time, WESCOM decided to expand their base and asked the Vietnamese refugees to vacate the land by 1997 New Year. CBCP had only 3 months to build a village from scratch, with all necessary infrastructure, to accommodate 1500 people who decided to live in Palawan (Others decided to move to Manila and other islands to live on their own).

I heard of this news at the end of August 1996. After serious thoughts, my wife and I decided to join CBCP to help them build the village. I quit my job as Research Officer at the University of Toronto Institute for Aerospace Studies. I closed and deregistered my Aerospace Engineering consultant firm. We quickly obtained 3-month visas to the Philippines. We showed up in Puerto Princesa on Sunday September 29, 1996 and honestly, we did not know when we could go home.

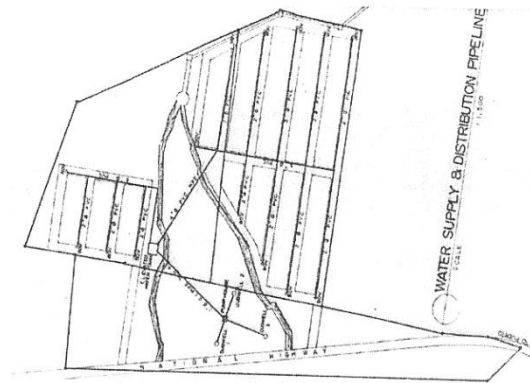
The days before we left Toronto were filled with unforgettable events. My Spar Aerospace ex-colleagues held a special lunch to say good bye and good luck to me (they thought I was going to live in a jungle!). Some close friends of ours gave us special books such as *How to learn Tagalog in a month* (it turned out later that 95% of local people could speak English and all official documents in the Philippines are in English!), *Natural herbs as medicine* (in case we could not get “western” medicine); and special gifts such as soldier’s name tag (from a Vietnamese captain surviving the Vietnam War) and a piece of jewelry from a 76-year-old friend that her mother passed on to her. Other friends brought clothes and medicine for distribution to the boat people in the camp. All these events lifted our spirits although we must admit we did not know exactly what we were going to do in Palawan.

We started working practically one hour after our arrival at the camp. I soon realized that I was facing an almost impossible task: complete the construction of the village in 3 months, with the help from some local construction companies, the labour from the Vietnamese in the camp and hired local Filipino labourers. My plan of socializing with the boat people and exploring Palawan in our leisure time quickly evaporated. Our construction administration team consisted of

- 4 Vietnamese overseas volunteers (my wife + myself from Canada, 1 male medical doctor + 1 female architect from the USA),
- CADP administration staff living in the camp, led by Sister Pascale,
- 1 Vietnamese administration representative from the camp (who was an electrical engineer, trained in Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology).

During the short 4 weeks prior to my arrival, CBCP managed to search and acquire a piece of 20-acre land, 13 km East of Puerto Princesa. They also hired a local Civil engineer to

- draft a construction map with details such as roads, household units, water supply system, septic tanks and open sewage system,
- draw architectural designs for 3 types of household to accommodate small families (\leq people), large families (> 4 people) and singles (max 4 people in the same unit),
- perform detailed estimates for the cost of building roads, household units, water supply system, septic tanks and open sewage system,
- prepare requests for bidding.



I was very much impressed with the quality of the above work, all performed singlehandedly by an engineer in 4 weeks, without using software tools! My first task was to review the estimates, the requests for bidding and determine whether we were ready for the open biddings on Oct 1, 1996, noting that some of the labour would be contributed by the refugees living in the camp, with modest wages (their contribution is a requisite for the privilege to live in the village when completed). The biddings for the construction were held separately for the water supply system, the roads, the septic tanks + sewing system and the household units. I chaired all bidding sessions; all bids were close to our asking price. I had to turn to the Civil engineer for his advice, relying on his knowledge of the past experience of these companies. All contracts were signed late afternoon Oct 1, 1996. From that point onwards, I assumed the responsibility of Technical Adviser and Contract Monitoring Officer. I also interacted with the Construction Management team who looked after all physical constructions. My wife worked as Purchasing Officer, Social worker and Hairstyling Instructor.

The following day, I went to the site of future Vietnamese Village (known later as Viet Ville). The land was full of bushes, bamboo and rattan trees; surprisingly being occupied by 2 squatter families. Apparently, they were all related and CBCP had paid in full the whole cost

of land purchase to the supposedly head of the families. That family vacated their house, leaving the other two still living there. When asked for their planned date of evacuation, they reacted violently and challenged our presence in “their land”. Apparently, the “head of family” kept all of the money (at least, that was what they claimed) and they would not move out, or allow “strangers” to set foot in their land. We then went to seek help from Mr. Edward Hagedorn, the Mayor of Puerto Princesa. He could apply pressure by asking Police to step in; but he did not do so, for fear of causing hatred to the Filipinos in that region towards the Vietnamese “invaders”. One week later, the squatter families silently moved out. We knew that the Mayor did something but we had no clues (until the inauguration of the village in April 1997, he secretly revealed to me that he paid these squatters with his own money, simply as his own contribution to the construction of the village!). I admired him for his wisdom, vision and kindness - something that is rarely seen in public servants in any part of the world.

A previous arrangement with the city of Puerto Princesa then allowed the mayor to move in the city’s land moving machinery to start clearing the land. We started building a fairly large bunkhouse for the hired construction workers to stay overnight and raising barbed wire fences along the land’s perimeter. October is a raining month in Palawan and the heavy rains slowed down our land clearing.

We could not wait much longer and on October 15, 1996 we held the first stone laying ceremony in which we also buried a time capsule containing the background story of the Vietnamese village. The following days saw people busy surveying and planting wooden pegs to mark boundary for roads and houses.



The construction was to be done in 3 phases: Phase A to accommodate 750 registered people + a Buddhist temple, a Catholic church, a Community Hall, an Administration building; Phases B and C for future expansion, including business units (for example, to bake French breads - baguettes, to make fresh rice noodles for Phở, etc.)

Eventually, only Phase A was completed because some of the refugees were admitted to a third country and some decided to do business outside of Palawan. The picture on the right shows an illustration of the village after its completion in 1997. The business units were built later in 1997, after the inauguration in April 1997.



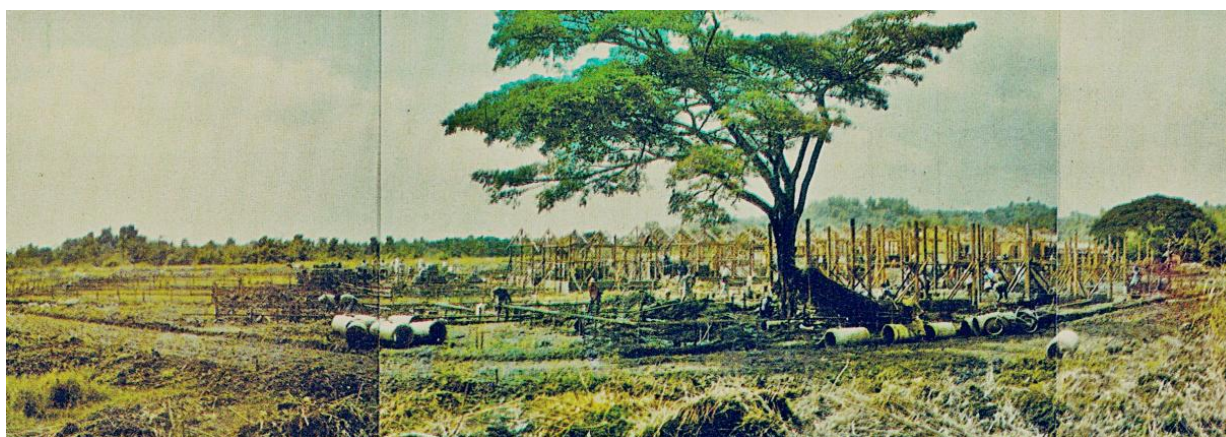
Due to the time constraint, all construction works had to be done simultaneously, which created a nightmare to the Construction Management team, who had to keep track of which supplies (e.g. sand, cement) belonging to which construction group (e.g. houses, or septic tanks, or road paving) and where to store them (with lack of storage space, yet the supplies must be delivered quickly to the appropriate group later). With the cooperation from all participants, we managed to solve this problem without any dispute.

At the beginning of November 1996, we were notified that the city of Puerto Princesa required a planning document that would detail the impact of our construction project on Palawan. They needed details of demography, environment and social condition of the village - before and after the construction. The city office was kind enough to give me a copy of a similar planning document (in English), with sufficient data for the area surrounding the village. We quickly prepared the document, submitted it and got it approved quickly (by the mayor) – while normally, such a document would need to be approved prior to the start of any construction! I learned the following statistics: 3 12-m deep dug wells, 1 water tower capable of storing 68,000 litres of water, 13,000 bags of cement, 2,800 cubic meters of gravel, 3,000 cubic meters of crushed stones, 80,000 m of 10-mm iron rods, 8,000 kg of nails,

14,000 m of electrical wires, etc. not mentioning the [coco lumber](#) from 170 acres of coconut trees! In 1996, the government of Palawan wanted to protect their forests with the “green environment” policy; they allowed only coco lumber for house construction.



Below is a photo of the village in mid November 1996.



One unexpected problem surfaced during the construction. In the original plan, wastewater from bathing and clothes/dish washing would be drained to the open sewage system before being dumped to the sea. Unfortunately, the “untreated” water will flow through a nearby land with fish ponds and the owner worried that the untreated water would damage his fish

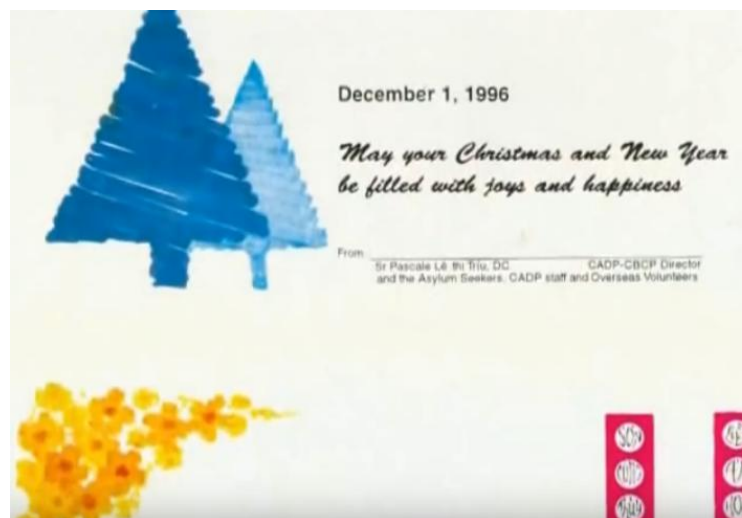
crops. He demanded the water to be treated before he would allow the water to go through his property (in our extended open sewage channels). To be a good long term solution, the filters should be replaceable easily; its cost should be low; and they should be effective enough to ensure the treated water free of soap and detergents!

Caught unprepared, we had no choice but consult local people for a quick and cheap suggestion. They came up with an ingenious suggestion: fill filters with “husk”. The suggestion was unanimously accepted. After trials with different filter thicknesses, a final prototype was built and used later on. The “treated” water was clear of soap and detergents, but it was not known whether it was free of chemicals!

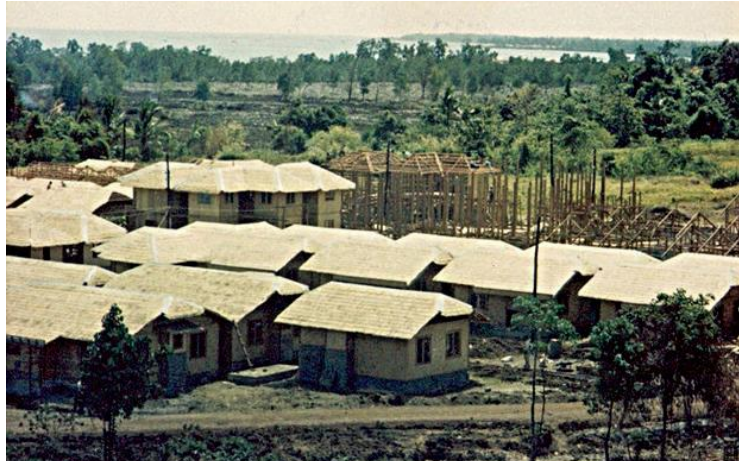


The construction progressed slowly, but to meet the December 31 1996 deadline, all constructions had to be done around the clock, in day and night shifts. One day I came to inspect the open sewage which was still under construction; I found out the contractor had used 8-mm iron rods (cf. 10-mm rods that were specified in their contract). It was difficult to see the difference between 8-mm rods and 10-mm rods by naked eyes; but the material cost of 8-mm rods was practically half of that for 10-mm rods! I decided to keep the part of the sewage that was completed, but to apply a penalty to the contractor for the price difference between the 2 kinds of rods, for the portion of the sewage that was already completed. The contractor had to use the 10-mm rods for the remaining construction. Although the penalty was insignificant in terms of cost, but my action was meant as warning to other contractors.

By mid December 1996, it was clear that there was no way to move the refugees to the village by December 31 because the water tower and the septic tanks were still being built, the houses did not have walls and doors yet, the city still reviewed our application for electrical power permit; etc. We were relieved when WESCOM extended the deadline of evacuation to March 31 1997. The refugees celebrated [1996 Christmas](#) (for the last time at the camp) with joys.

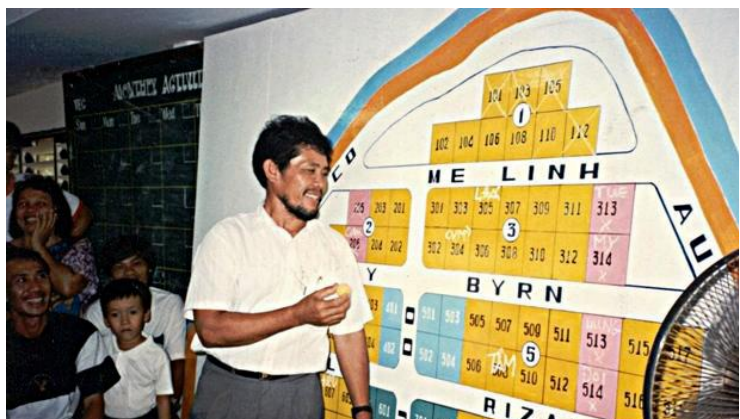


By mid January 1997, some houses had roofs, walls and doors as can be seen in the photo on the right. The roads were not paved yet for the obvious reason. The construction picked up a faster pace, thanks to the dry and cooler season in Palawan. All of us felt much better because there was hope that the construction could be finished on time.



By early March 1997, most of the constructions were completed, except for road paving and electrical power installation.

In mid March 1997, the roads were given names to honour legendary Vietnamese and Filipino heroes. Numbers were assigned to household units and a lottery system was used to assign houses to the refugees. Meetings were held to draft and ratify rules and regulations for the village.



The photo below shows a 2-storey unit, typically assigned to groups of singles.



While not being a luxurious house, it provides a cozy, comfortable place to live in, with a much improved condition compared to the rooms in the refugee camp. Notice the thatched roof, the walls made of woven bamboo slats, and the outdoor staircase, door and window frames, all made of coco lumber.

RULES AND REGULATIONS OF THE VIET VILLAGE

WHEREAS, the Memorandum of Understanding signed on July 17, 1996 between the CADP-CBCP (Center for Assistance to Displaced Persons - Catholic Bishop's Conference of the Philippines) and the Department of Social Welfare and Development states that all the remaining Vietnamese Nationals shall be allowed to stay in the Philippines as a durable solution to their status being explored;

WHEREAS, it is stipulated in the said Memorandum that all remaining Vietnamese Nationals shall be relocated to another site within the province of Palawan while pending such a durable solution, and shall be under the administration of CADP in a manner that shall provide for a 'progressive self-reliance';

WHEREAS, under the administration of CADP, the remaining Vietnamese Nationals have constructed the Viet Village in Santa Lourdes, Palawan, as their relocation center, and have pledged to live together as a community in order to maintain and promote their culture and tradition in harmony with the social setting of the Philippines, to ensure tranquility among themselves, and to secure the blessings of liberty to themselves and their posterity;

WHEREAS, in order to help achieve the above goals it is necessary to establish rules and regulations that govern the administration and operation of the Viet Village;

NOW, THEREFORE, the following rules and regulations are hereafter established for the Viet Village and its residents:

Article 1: Administration

- (a) All administrative powers shall be vested in CADP, which is also the funding and consulting body of the village.
- (b) In the spirit of progressive self-reliance, the involvement of CADP in administration shall gradually diminish over a five-year period from the start of the village operation.

Article 2: Executive Committee

The Executive Committee shall consist of a Chairman, a Vice Chairman, and an Advisory Board.

Article 2.1: Election of Chairman and Vice Chairman

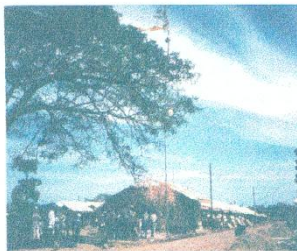
- (a) The Chairman and Vice Chairman shall be elected by eligible electors in the village. Eligible electors are those who are eighteen years of age or over, mentally fit, and have resided in the village at least nine months before the election day.
- (b) The Chairman and Vice Chairman shall hold their offices for one-year term.
- (c) In order to be eligible, the Chairman and Vice Chairman candidates should:

Coming closer to the end of March 1997, it was hot and dry in Palawan; so dry that our dug wells ran out of water and the brook flowing through the village was dry as a bone. We were panicking when it was time to move the boat people to the new village. There was no water everywhere. We quickly consulted local water experts and then followed their advice to drill deep wells. There was plenty of water at the depth of 150 feet; we were going to have water all year around! While the deep wells were being drilled, we started to evacuate the camp and move the refugees to the village. WESCOM was very kind to us by supplying two truckloads of water every day until the deep wells were operational. In the meantime, the residents in the village had to follow ration of their water usage (20 litres/ person/ day). At that time, they had to carry water home because there was no running water yet.

The community hall (as seen in the photo on the right) was the last building to be completed to host the village inauguration. It would remind Vietnamese people of the villages in their home country in the old days where people used to gather around it for important events in the village. Its design bears traces of typical Chinese architecture; its curved roof posed challenges to our carpenters because they had not done such a construction before.



With the presence of Most Reverend Bishop Ramon C. Arguelles, D.D.
Chairman, Commission on Migration, CBCD



With the assistance of
Hon. Lina B. Laigo
Secretary, Department of Social
Welfare and Development
Rev. Msgr. Nguyen Van Tai, Ph. D.
Chaplain of the Catholic Vietnamese in
the Philippines
Sister Pascale Le Thi Triu, D.C.
Director, Center for Assistance to
Displaced Persons Inc.

Mr. Che Nhat Giao, Representative of the Remaining Vietnamese Nationals
requests the honor of your presence at the

Inauguration Ceremony of the Viet Village

at 9:30 AM, Wed. April 16 1997 Sta Lourdes, Puerto Princesa City, Palawan

Reception to follow the ceremony

RSVP Beth Tel (63) (48) 433 2684 Fax (63) (48) 433 9086
Lynn Tel/Fax (63) (02) 524 0913 e-mail: cadp@pal-onl.com



Eventually, the jubilant [inauguration](#) was held on April 16, 1997 with notable attendees: Church and government officials and Vietnamese resettled in various countries, along with 1,000 Vietnamese villagers left in Puerto Princesa. "This village will remain as a monument of everlasting friendship between the Filipino and Vietnamese people" said then-Bishop Ramon Arguelles in a speech during the inauguration ceremony. The date April 16 1997 was

chosen to coincide with the Vietnamese holiday honouring Vietnam's mythological first king Hung Vuong. The ceremony was held in front of the community hall, followed by a cultural show by the residents of the new village, with plenty of Vietnamese and Filipino foods.

My wife and I left Palawan for Toronto on April 19, 1997, just in time for us to prepare our tax returns. I rejoined Spar Aerospace Ltd. in August 1997 and continued to work as an aerospace engineer. I frequently contacted friends at the village to learn about their progress and how the people coped with their new lives. I was happy to see them planting Dragon Fruit trees, Bougainvilleas, Royal Poincianas to provide similar landscapes for villages back in Vietnam. I was also glad that they finished building a library, a restaurant (serving authentic Vietnamese foods), a Buddhist temple and a Catholic church after our departure.



Early 1998, they happily celebrated their first Vietnamese New Year in the village, with masses in the Catholic church (in the photo at right), with praying in the Buddhist temple, and other traditional festivities. All that led to their first anniversary of the village which was held on April 16 1998. I was invited to attend as a guest of honour. I took a week off work and joined them again. This time I was asked to help them complete the 1998 Yearbook of Vietnamese Village, which was to be handed out during the anniversary ceremony.



The residents celebrated their first anniversary in the evening with a Vietnamese cultural show with plays and singing. On this occasion, a famous Vietnamese writer travelling from Toronto handed out gifts from his Vietnamese friends to the children.

Life in the village continued to go on smoothly and they celebrated the second anniversary on April 16 1999 with similar events. Then, some of the villagers were sponsored by friends or relatives to migrate to Australia and the US. Slowly, people started leaving the village. Their unattended houses ruined. The roads were covered with weeds; street signs were corroded. In 2016, left behind were a Vietnamese restaurant, two houses occupied by two Vietnamese – Filipino families, and the Catholic church which still offered masses to the local people.



Street sign NOW



Street sign THEN



This Vietnamese village project left us with many unforgettable memories. As an example, one night late November 1996, an 8-year old girl in the camp suffered dengue hemorrhagic fever. We were awoken at 2 AM. My wife (acting as a social worker and interpreter) and I rushed her and her mother to the only hospital in Puerto Princesa. The poor girl had lost so much blood and needed immediate blood transfusion. Unfortunately, the hospital ran out the type of blood needed and emergency blood supply from Manila would not be in Puerto Princesa until 12 hours later. 4 AM, I went back to the camp and used the PA system to wake up people and asked for urgent blood donation. By 6 AM, many went to the hospital for blood tests; but unfortunately, none of them had the needed blood type. A local radio station broke out the news; and at 9 AM, the principal of an elementary school in the city went to the hospital to donate his blood. The girl was saved! Frankly, I had never witnessed such love and care from people of different families and races, acted quickly to save the life of a child that was not at all related to them.

Some other memories were sweet; others were shocking. First, a sweet memory. Although I worked 16 hours a day, I still managed to have time off now and then to play games with children in the camp. Some young Filipino kids also walked into the camp and played with us. There was no problem although these kids spoke Tagalog only and I spoke only English and Vietnamese.

I used to hold meetings in my “office” in the evening to review daily progress and plan activities for the following day. The picture on the right shows my office and residence; the meeting room was close to the entrance door, our bedroom was next to it, towards the back, followed by the washroom. In those evenings with bright moon lights, these kids would stand by the entrance door, waiting for me to come out to play with them. Sometimes, I had to tell them to go home because I had no time for them.



In the late afternoon of our last day in the camp, before everybody moved to the village, an 8-year old Filipino boy living outside the camp came to see me, wearing a clean new shirt, while he normally just wore old shorts, with bare chest. He gave me a drawing that he had just finished, and said something in Tagalog. Through an interpreter, I then understood that he came to say goodbye to me and wanted to give me a souvenir. I was so much touched, and I embraced him for a while. I knew I had a true friend.

Now, a sweet/shocking memory. Remember the time I went back to Palawan to attend the second anniversary of the village? I did not want to be disturbed while preparing the Yearbook and I decided to hide myself in the old camp. All refugees had moved to the village, leaving behind Amerasians, who were refused for immigration to the US; they decided to stay on in the camp, hoping one day they would be allowed to go to the US. One night, I was hungry and went to the nuns' residence kitchen searching for food. All was left

was left-over cold rice; no other food, except soya sauce. While I was eating my dinner, an Amerasian man knocked on the door. As I opened the door, mistaking me for a priest, he begged in Vietnamese:

- Father, I'm so hungry; can you spare me some food?

I told him I had nothing but the rice and soya sauce in my bowl. He did not mind; he took it and ate it in no time. That night, I was so busy that I could not go buy some food outside the camp. I went to bed hungry; but I felt good because I did something good. The following morning, I got the news that the very man who shared dinner with me the previous night, was stabbed to death, after he was drunk and got into a fight with a Filipino soldier in the camp!

Now, it is more than twenty years since I last set foot in Palawan. The memories are still lingering, although fading day after day. Friends have urged me to write an article about my life experiences in Palawan. I have been hesitating and tried to find excuse for not doing it, until now. Looking back, I think the days I spent in Palawan were the best time in my life. There, I learned how to share and to appreciate life, from people around me. Some of the boat people that I talked to made it to the shore of Palawan without food, water and even their beloved ones who could not bear the hardship and died at sea. I realized that living without water (like in the village in April 1997) or no electrical power, no air conditioner, is just like living in hell. In hindsight, it was a miracle that there was no fire in the village in April 1997. Just imagine what if a fire broke out then, when there was no water and the city fire station was more than 13 km away.

Of all things done in my life, my achievement in this project is indeed the most outstanding one. I got the most satisfaction out of it, although it was just an unpaid voluntary job. I learned the obvious that money is not everything; the joys of life are behind sacrifices, endurance, giving and receiving love.

Finally, I want to take this opportunity to praise the Philippines and their people. Despite of being a small and developing country; they did not hesitate to take in and nurture the hopeless Vietnamese boat people for so many years. It was the Philippines, the only country in the world, that allowed the Vietnamese boat people to stay in their land in 1996, while other neighbouring countries turned away boat people or forced repatriations. It was the Church of the Philippines who tirelessly negotiated with their government for the humanitarian act that granted permanent temporary residence status to the Vietnamese boat people. It was the unsung kindness behind the silent acts of the mayor that helped build the Vietnamese village and the school principal that saved the life of a young Vietnamese child. After living together with the Filipinos for so many years, the Vietnamese boat people created a loving bond with the local people in Puerto Princesa as obvious in the following [quote](#): *"I can no longer imagine Palawan without the Vietnamese"*.

Nowadays, the Vietnamese village is practically abandoned. Yet, Viet Ville restaurant is still operating and the “Our Lady of Vietnam” church continues to be a local respectable worshipping place. The village has been considered as a tourist attraction in Palawan, advertised locally and globally, as a place honouring everlasting friendship between the Filipinos and the Vietnamese people, as was originally projected by Archbishop Ramon Arguelles in his inauguration speech in April 1997.

