

# Escape to freedom He fled Vietnam to begin anew in land of opportunity

By MAUD S. BEELMAN  
Central Pa. AP Writer

Tung Dang smiles a lot these days. He's looking forward to 1986 as the start of a "totally new life in the real world." How things have changed.

Five years ago, Dang was suffocating in what to the rest of the world is Vietnam, but to him, was "a big prison."

Today, he has mastered English, a language unknown to him in 1980, has a high school diploma and soon a college diploma — Dang is beginning anew.

On Jan. 4, he graduates from Penn State with a degree in computer science. In February, he'll start a \$28,000 job at Texas Instruments in Tennessee.

But in 1980, Dang was a desperate 14-year-old.

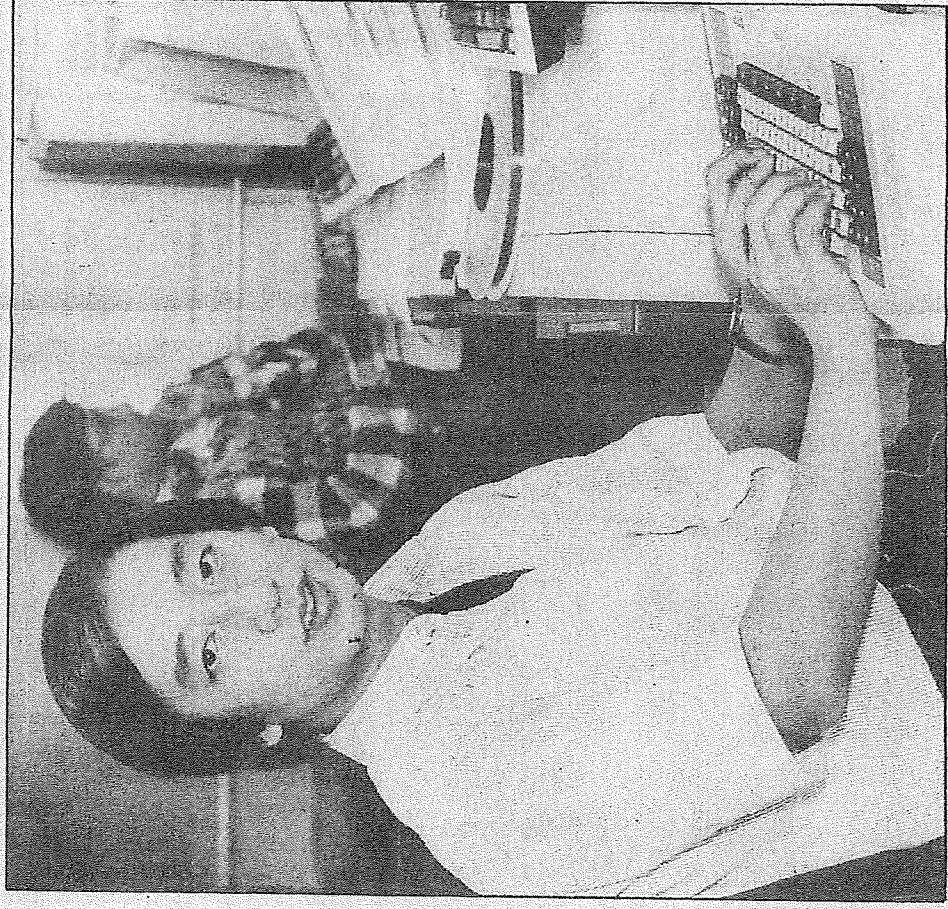
He had seen his country decimated by a brutal, protracted war. He watched his mother die of asthma two years after the 1975 "fall of Saigon," only because available medicine wasn't made available to her. He endured his father's imprisonment for trying to arrange an escape for the family.

"They control you," he continued. "You have no choices of doing anything. Every time of the day they want to know exactly where you are, what you're doing. You can't even go from one district to another (without) having to report it."

"It's just like the whole country is a big prison. That's exactly what it is. It's just horrible," he said.

The flight from his homeland was no better.

After two days at sea, the



AP Wirephoto / Craig Hautz

**FROM REPRESSION TO FREEDOM:** Tung Dang, who will graduate from Penn State on Jan. 4 with a degree in computer science, fled from Vietnam five years ago.

refugees ran out of fresh water. They drifted for two more days before meeting "pirates," mercenary fishermen who prey on such escapees.

The pirates towed the small boat close to the coast of Thailand. Dang said the only reason no one was killed was because there were enough valuables and women to mollify the pirates.

"I remember the raping," he said. One in particular, an attack on a 15-year-old girl, stands out. "I was up in the top deck

and... they raped her in the room below and she was crying. It was really horrible. You knew they were raping her. But you couldn't do anything because you move, they kill everybody else. You have to sacrifice something for the freedom."

After three months at a Thai refugee camp, Dang, his uncle and three cousins were allowed to join relatives already in the United States.

Dang went to live with his aunt, who had escaped two years earlier, and in the fall of 1980 began classes at Plum Senior High School in suburban Pittsburgh.

"I didn't know any English at all so they (wondered) what could they do with me?" he said.

Finally, figuring mathematics was universal in its language, a math teacher was called in. She gave him a problem and it was obvious in the way he solved it that Dang was quite advanced in mathematics, recalled Christine Bender, Dang's high school chemistry teacher.

"As a matter of fact, when I got him, I'm sure he could have taught me some chemistry," she said. At 14, Dang was put in the 11th grade.

The two became friends and Bender helped Dang with his English during off periods. By Christmas, he was speaking English.

"He would ask a lot of questions. And he wanted to learn a lot of slang words," Bender said, remembering how one day she delegated to some of the "nice boys" in the class the task of explaining to Dang the meaning of an obscure slang word he had asked about.

The outgoing Dang was a hit with classmates, who called him "Joe" because they couldn't pronounce "Tung" properly, she said.

"There are still a lot of teachers around here that talk about him. And his graduating so quickly and doing as well as he is doesn't surprise any of them," Bender said. "He was just a remarkable kid, memorable (oo)." Dang graduated in the top of his

high school class two years after fleeing his homeland and enrolled at Penn State the next fall. Grants, loans, and odd jobs on campus financed his education. Dang took extra courses each term and attended summer school so that he could finish quickly.

"If I had to go another semester I would not be able to support myself at all. The money I have is down to cents now," he said. But another reason for the rush through school, Dang said, is his family, who are forever in his thoughts.

"My family back in Vietnam, they need my help and I really want to get out (of school) so I can have some money to send them," he said.

Dang, who just celebrated his 20th birthday, realizes his story is incredible. It's even more so to him when he thinks of how far he has come since that April night.

Now the oddities of life in his new country — snow, cold-water fountains, hot showers at the turn of a knob, dishwashers, computers — are commonplace.

"I came here with nothing. Now I'm worth something, somebody wanted me to work for them. And I have friends now. I feel very lucky to have everything," he said. "It's everything that I wished to be. It's unreal."

The New Year will be the beginning of a "totally new life in the real world," he said. "I'll be able to do most of everything I wanted to do and my whole future now is in my hands. Nobody can hold me back."

Dang's success is, in large part, due to his troubled background, Bender said.

"He's had more experiences in life than most people ever do," she said. "I think he is very appreciative of anything that anybody has ever done for him. And he realizes he has an opportunity here and he just always seemed to want to make the best of that opportunity."

"He's always saying that whenever he owns his own house, with his swimming pool, he's going to put a sign out front saying, 'America, land of opportunity.'"

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