

Emotional return to the New Forest for Vietnamese Boat People

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FIVE former refugees from Vietnam made an emotional return to the [New Forest](#) community that welcomed them with open arms when they fled their homeland in 1979.

The five were among the thousands of Vietnamese Boat People who made the perilous journey across the South China Sea in the wake of Saigon falling to the Communists in 1975 and China invading four years later.

Many came to England and were temporarily housed at RAF Sopley at Bransgore at different times between 1979-1982, before being permanently resettled.

The five - Tu Thi Hi, Tu Ngoc Long, Tran Quan Duc, Hoang My and Michael Lock (his adopted English name) came back on Saturday to the last surviving building from the Sopley Camp days for the unveiling of a commemorative plaque.

And they were reunited with some of the field workers who ran the reception centre and who looked after them as bewildered young refugees 42 years ago.



The plaque, on the wall of what is now the Friends of New Forest Airfields heritage centre, is dedicated to those who survived the journey on flimsy craft, the estimated 300-600,000 who perished en route and to the fact that for 2,855 refugees, Sopley Camp was the beginning of a new life

It also marks the fact on May 21 1979, the crew of a British cargo ship, SS Sibonga, led by Captain Healey Martin, rescued 1,003 'Boat People' from two small, overcrowded, sinking craft.

One of those rescued was Michael who is now 67, a computer engineer and who acted as an interpreter when he arrived at Sopley as one of the first refugees. He had learned English in South Vietnam.

He told the guests: "Many of us tried to escape from Communism because we did not know what the future held. The Sibonga came to our rescue when we had been drifting for two days in the sea in our flimsy boat .

"We climbed up the ladders to get on board the Sibonga and Captain Martin and his crew gave us the first idea of what our new life would be like, including Anchor butter."

Among those who ran the reception centre and were there on Saturday were field workers Helen Clifford from Lymington, Chris Bentall and Eamonn Doherty who was a university student in 1979 and took time out to work at the camp.

It was Helen's husband Tony who had the idea of the plaque.

Mr Doherty said: "Many people risked life and limb to make a new life here and they made a very dangerous journey to do that."

He said the camp was helped by many members of local community and without them, it would not have been possible.

One of those was local GP, Dr Hickish, now in his 90s who attended the unveiling.

Chairman of the trustees of FONFA, Dr Henry Goodall said it would be a lasting memorial to a very special episode in more recent history