

Seeking Refuge

In the late 1970s, when North Vietnam gained control of South Vietnam at the end of the Vietnam War, thousands of people who had supported the South Vietnamese Government left the country. They were afraid that the new government would send them to prison or take away their homes and possessions. Many left their country in small boats.

In 1976, the first boat reached Darwin. By the end of 1981, about 2000 Vietnamese 'boat people' (as they had been named by the media) had survived the dangerous journey from Vietnam. Many died trying as their small boats sank or were attacked by pirates. The influx of refugees created much discussion and debate.

While some Vietnamese refugees arrived by boat, most came from refugee camps in Thailand and Malaysia. The refugee camps were run by the United Nations. Most of the refugees chosen by Australian Government officials for entry to Australia already had relatives in Australia, or had skills and training that would prove useful in their new country. There were also a small number of students selected.

The flow of boat people slowed after 1982, when the Vietnamese Government agreed to let people leave. They also allowed people to come to Australia to join their families who had fled earlier.

By 1985, 70 000 refugees from South-East Asia, mostly Vietnam, had settled in Australia. The arrival of Vietnamese refugees forced changes in migration policy around the world, especially in Australia. Countries recognised that they needed to accept far more refugees than they had in the past due to the huge numbers of people being displaced by wars.

By 1990, Vietnam's government had relaxed departure restrictions allowing a steady stream of people to arrive in Australia. Most of these people came to join family members already in Australia.

End of the White Australia Policy

Australia's immigration policy before 1973 had discriminated against non-Europeans. This policy was called the 'White Australia policy'. The arrival of Vietnamese refugees in the 1970s signalled the end of the White Australia Policy. Since 1973 Australia has accepted migrants and refugees from all over the world.



Vietnamese 'boat people' heading for Australia

The Vietnam War

Australian troops fought in Vietnam between 1962 and 1972. Vietnam was a nation divided into two. In the late 1950s, the communist government in the north (supported by the Soviet Union) launched into war with the United States-supported south. The United States and its allies (including Australia) became involved to try and prevent the spread of communism in Asia. By 1968 there were 8500 Australian troops in Vietnam, backed up by helicopters, transport planes, bombers and four warships.

The Australian task force was stationed in Phuoc Tuy province, south of Saigon (now called Ho Chi Min City). In 1969 Australian troops began to be withdrawn from Vietnam. The last Australian troops were withdrawn in 1972. The war ended in 1975, when North Vietnamese troops occupied the South Vietnamese capital, Saigon.