

From Vietnam to vessel master

One mariner's unique and remarkable journey



Marilyn Williams photo

According to U.S. Coast Guard records, Mang Vo is the first Vietnamese-born, U.S. Coast Guard-licensed (unlimited) master mariner to sail as skipper aboard a U.S. merchant vessel.

More than 25 years ago, Mang Vo found himself in a new country, without family, job prospects or even a working knowledge of the English language. What he did have was determination to overcome any obstacles that life might bring.

The year was 1975, and Mang was forced to start over following the fall of his native South Vietnam. The young naval officer left behind all that he had and arrived in the United States as a refugee. He spoke barely a few words of English.

Discovering America on his own wasn't easy. "Everything was surprising and new – I had never heard of McDonald's," he says. "I had no choice but to push myself."

His sponsor in Newton, New Jersey, found him a job as a machine operator in a plastics plant. He walked the distance to work, as well as to the laundromat and supermarket, for months before he could afford his first "extremely used" car.

Because he worked on rotational shifts, Mang's formal schooling had to wait. "I would get up early each morning to watch a program on PBS that taught basic English," he says.

Mang recalls telling people he eventually planned to attend a merchant marine college. "Everyone thought I wanted to join the Marines," he laughs.

In 1977, Mang enrolled at the State University of New York Maritime College at Fort Schuyler, New York.

“Where it would take a half-hour for others to read a chapter, it would take me three hours going word by word with the dictionary,” he says.

Nevertheless, the combination of unrelenting effort and intellect placed Mang in the top 10 percent of the class of 1981. Along the way, he also obtained his U.S. citizenship. But graduation was merely another steppingstone. Mang was far from fulfilling his goals.

In 1981, he joined the Marine Department of Exxon Company, USA (a SeaRiver predecessor). Mang served aboard various crude and chemical tankers, and was promoted to second mate in 1985. He transferred ashore in 1987, and held positions in operations and business development in Baytown and Houston.

But with a strong heritage in seafaring – both his father and grandfather were mariners – Mang often reflected on his ambition to sail one day as captain. Although he knew his time in the office provided valuable experience, it could not satisfy this calling.

In October 1994, he informed SeaRiver management of his desire to return to a life at sea. The transition would require additional effort, because Mang’s licensing credentials no longer satisfied changing regulatory requirements. He needed to complete numerous courses and meet other standards before he would be able to sail.

As he would say, in his crisp dialect, “No problem, I’ll be ready.” The necessary training simply represented another challenge for Mang to meet.

He returned to the fleet and subsequently earned a promotion to chief mate. In 1999, Mang reached yet another milestone when he upgraded his U.S. Coast Guard license to (unlimited) master mariner – making him one

of only three Vietnamese immigrants to hold such a license.

Far from being complacent, Mang aimed higher. As mariners know, there is satisfaction in raising a license, but complete fulfillment only comes from sailing in that capacity. In 2002, Captain Mang Vo made his inaugural voyage as a master on the S/R CHARLESTON – becoming, according to U.S. Coast Guard records, the first Vietnamese-born, U.S. Coast Guard-licensed (unlimited) master mariner to sail as skipper aboard a U.S. merchant vessel.

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Still, there were more credentials to pursue. In short order, Mang obtained first-class pilotage in Prince William Sound, Alaska, helping him to serve as captain aboard the S/R HINCHINBROOK and S/R PUGET SOUND.

During his years ashore, Mang made a lasting impression on his co-workers of his capabilities – so much so that he continues to accept brief, periodic assignments, such as special computer projects designed to support fleet activities. Currently, Mang serves as a coordinator in Operations Support. Colleagues praise his methodical thoroughness and understanding of process flow, which make him a skilled troubleshooter.

Over the years, Mang has continual-

ly reached out to support others. “The United States and this company have been good to me, and I want to give something back,” he says. He has contributed time and talents to the U.S. Catholic Charities, the American Red Cross and Houston’s Vietnamese Culture and Science Association. His efforts have earned five ExxonMobil Volunteer Involvement Program grants totaling \$2,500. (See VIP, page 21.)

To round out his skills, Mang has started Spanish lessons. “Who knows? Being able to talk *en español* could come in handy some day,” he says. Mang has also completed the prerequisite courses to become a Certified Financial Planner, and he expects to eventually sit for the certification exam. His long-range plan is to assist people during his retirement.

Retirement? For Mang, it doesn’t seem possible that 28 years have passed since his forced flight from Vietnam, when he was stuffed into the hold of a cargo ship with a thousand other refugees, scared and wondering what would become of the rest of his life.

“Seven years later, I saw that cargo ship – GREEN FOREST – again. She passed in the distance, as I was standing watch on the bridge of the EXXON GETTYSBURG. The sight of that ship really hit me hard,” he says. The flashback was a stark and poignant contrast to his position of responsibility for the safekeeping of a multimillion-dollar asset, precious cargoes and the lives of his fellow crewmembers.

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What will be his next challenge? What path will he take? Only time will tell. *Muy bien, Mang Vo!* 