



“Thank you for life”

The rescue of persons in distress at sea, including refugees, is an obligation under international maritime law, as well as being a long established humanitarian duty. This is the story of one such rescue and the reunion of the vessel’s crew and refugees some 30 years later.

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Jannike Olsson, Senior Manager, Liquid Cargo Claims, shares her colleague, Alf Ove Stenhagen's, story of a rescue at sea and the celebration thirty years later organized by one of those saved. At the time, Alf Ove was the Chief Officer on board the DANITA*,* a product tanker owned by Gard's Norwegian member, Ugland.

The DANITA was sailing in ballast through the South China Sea, en-route from Japan to the Arabian Gulf. During the early hours of 2 June 1987, the lookout on the bridge spotted a fishing vessel that appeared to need help. There were several individuals on the deck of the fishing vessel, waving desperately, seeking the attention of those on board the DANITA. On closer examination, it became clear that this was no ordinary fishing vessel – she was carrying a considerable number of refugees who were clearly concerned about their safety on board the aged vessel and were desperately seeking rescue.

DANITA's Master wasted no time. He immediately raised the ship's general emergency alarm, mustered his crew, and safely picked up all 58 Vietnamese refugees from the fishing vessel. The refugees included young men, women and infants. They had been at sea for fourteen days, and were running out of food and water.

Having rescued all those on board the fishing vessel, the fishing vessel was set on fire to avoid her becoming a navigation hazard to other ships. The DANITA then deviated to Singapore to land those rescued. The voyage to Singapore took five days during which time the refugees were cared for by DANITA's crew. The refugees were split by the crew on board into two groups – the first group included refugees from the same family who could document that they had relatives in another country, the second group contained the rest of the refugees. All 58 were landed in Singapore. At this point the UN representatives in Singapore took over - they repatriated the first group to the country that already had relatives of the refugees, and the second group were moved to a refugee camp in the Philippines. All of this was concluded within six months.

Thirty years later, Alf Ove received a call whilst at his desk in Arendal where he works in Gard's Liquid Cargo Claim's Team. The caller was Mr. Chanh Le aged 44, one of the refugees rescued that day in 1987 when he was only 14 years old. He was calling to say *thank you for life*. A re-union party followed in Oslo where other members of the DANITA crew also attended, including the Master, Chief Engineer and an AB. The party was attended by 90 family members of the refugees rescued by the DANITA.

The refugees and their family members had come from the Netherlands, Denmark, Norway and as far away as California, USA. Alf Ove realized at the party just how significant the act of thirty years ago was, and how much it meant to the refugees, and their now extended families, that they had been given a second chance of life. Alf Ove commented "It is the duty of crewmembers to rescue those at sea in need so at the time, I was just doing my job. Yet, the gratitude of those rescued thirty years later touched me deeply."

Above: Chanh Le, Ole Skærning (Master), Alf Ove Stenhagen (Chief Officer) and Anders Staurvik (AB)

With this thought we also reflect on, and thank those, who continue to rescue refugees in distress, sometimes under very difficult conditions.