

# Story of Nguyen Thanh Tu – a fishman

Recorded by Capt. Nguyen Viet Anh

*Nguyen Thanh Tu, aged 25, lives in the Nghe An province, Vietnam. He worked on board F.V Xiu Fu No.1, a Taiwanese fishing vessel manned with 13 Chinese, 12 Vietnamese and Taiwanese nationals. The colleagues and Tu were attacked by Somalian pirates then held in captivity from 25th December 2010 to 17th July 2012.*

*Tu narrated this story in December 2015 while he was on board a fishing vessel in port. The story was narrated via Facebook messages, during a period of about 5 days.*

*Nguyen Thanh Tu has permitted the translation of his story for use by the Maritime Piracy Humanitarian Response Programme (MPHRP).*

*“Uncle”, used here in the account, is a term of respect in Vietnam.*

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At 08.00 AM on 25th December 2010, our fishing vessel F.V Xiu Fu No.1 was fishing. I was woken up by an alarm. The fishing operation comprised of 2 shifts – fishing and fish harvesting. I was member of the harvesting group.

Having heard the alarm bells, I woke up and got out of bed. My colleagues informed me that the pirates were attacking; fishing equipment should be quickly taken back on board. Just 5 buoys were prepared then.

Everyone hurried to take back the fishing equipment.

Some of the equipment was taken back on board but the skipper commanded us to cut off the remaining equipment to run away.

He also required everyone to look out for any ships around.

We found out there was a Korean tanker.

We did not think she was a pirate’s vessel as pirates’ boats looked different when shown in the cinemas.

Therefore the skippers told us to come in for lunch...

While we were lunching, the skipper came and told us that our vessel was captured; we were unable to run away.....

Everyone felt pretty afraid.

We got out and saw 2 motorboats approaching.

The skipper told us to come to the rooms immediately.

About 5 minutes later the pirates boarded our vessel.

They forced us to gather on the main deck.

They all carried guns.

We were frightened when we saw the pirates.

They forced us to show all the valuables such as jewellery, money, mobile phones.

Then we were under the control of the pirates. They used our vessel to detect and capture others.

Some days later, the pirates attacked a ship which was disabled owing to a problematic engine. They locked us in cabins so that I did not know what type of ship it was (tanker? cargo ship? or another).

The attacked ship was firing at the pirates. Both vessels brutally fired at one another.

I was very frightened and lay down on the ground.

I heard the terrible shooting sounds.

A little over one hour later, I heard the voices of people out along the corridors...

Eventually after firing at one another, the pirates had won, captured the other ship and brought three seafarers on board our vessel. The three new seafarers became the hostages. The pirates communicated to their accomplices to come and take the captured ship away.

So their goal had been accomplished. Their plan was that they handle the captured vessel to attack the others. Once a vessel successfully captures another one, she may leave the open sea to proceed ashore.

Lastly, we and our vessel were taken to an island belonging to Somalia.

At that point, we had 26 crew members, uncle.

The skipper was Taiwanese, there were 12 Vietnamese nationals and the remaining people were Chinese.

A full month after arriving, a fire began on board the vessel. The pirates themselves started it. I thought that the fire in the vessel would not be able to be extinguished.

Fearing that we would make a revolt, the pirates warned us they would shoot us.

Firstly, we were so afraid that we dared to do nothing. But later, noting that the fire was taking hold, we lost our fear. We made the greatest effort to extinguish the fire.

Everyone looked for possible things that might contain water and extinguish the fire, and finally it was extinguished. But then I looked around and noticed that there were no valuable things remaining on board.

I thought the unluckinesses stopped there, but unexpectedly... that was just the start.

During the early days of being hijacked, we were still very unaffected and naïve. We did not think of the difficulties and challenges we would face. Even we believed that it is good that the families receive our wages while we did nothing there....

Nobody foresaw how terrible the tortures conducted on us by the pirates would be.

Sometimes the pirates very unreasonably beat us, uncle!

When they were joyful, they might give smiles at us, but if they were angry, they took all measures to torture us. Although being angry, we had to suffer without resistance...

Once the pirates found a pistol in the cabin of the skipper, they tied all the crew members up. We supposed at that moment that someone among us would be shot.

Do you know what I thought of then?

I thought it would be an injustice that at our age we, the unmarried men, have to die. We could do nothing to fight against the injustice.

And I asked for a cigarette to smoke... As I was thinking my life ending in that moment.

But the pirates, in response to the request had given me a cigarette. I spoke to my colleagues that now we must accept what was happening.

But, eventually the heavy moment passed. And thank God, this terrible end had not taken place....

At first, when we went ashore... the ship's rice had not run out, and we had acceptable meals...

But when the ship's rice ran out, the pirates provided us with a so very bad a kind of rice that we could not at first take meals. It seemed that the rice had been wet for some time; the seed had become brown and black. The cooked rice smelt bad.

Firstly nobody could eat the said rice... We cooked but did not eat, we threw out the rice.

Noticing that, the pirates reduced rice rations, as they assumed we had wasted it....

But the crazy guys did not think that the rice was mouldy and smelly.

Subsequently, we ate that kind of rice. Because, simply if we did not take that rice, we would be hungry and not able to survive...

At first, we had to hold our breath to swallow the rice into our stomachs...

Gradually the bad smell became familiar to us and later we all could take the rice....

In the morning, we were given bowls of wheat flour, mixed in the water then the mixture was boiled in order to become porridge and each of us was given nearly a bowl of porridge.

And in the afternoon, they gave us rice to cook and each of us was provided with nearly a bowl of steamed smelly rice.

Such daily life elapsed along with the time. Having had the morning meals, we wished for the afternoon ones to come. We looked for the moment of distribution of meal rations every time...

Sometimes we picked a seed of rice up off the ground to eat it.

During this period the pirates made phone calls to the shipowner, negotiating the amount of ransom...

But so far as we knew they did not accept to free the vessel due to the so called little amount.

Then the pirates decided to continue holding our vessel and used her to hunt and capture the other ones. And the day on which we left the island to hunt had come...

Uncle, they took us together on board to hunt.

They attempted to use us as the hostages in case they were attacked.

A number of vessels were attacked but fled.

There is a day that I will remember forever.

On the said day, the pirates forced us to come to the Japanese navy patrolling sea area, and then left the vessel to drift, awaiting passing ships.

About 1 hour later, they detected a ship sailing close. They forced us all to stay in the cabins, nobody went out. They put down 2 fast motorboats kept aboard our vessel to run after the other ship, but she did not stop. The pirates fired at them.

Subsequently that ship stopped, but she moved around our vessel that made 2 motor boats unable to access.

And about 20 minutes later, the air force crafts came, flying above our sea area. That situation made the pirates frightened. They drove the motorboats back to our vessel.

I have watched the Vietnam War films since I was young...

Now I was on scene, seeing with my own eyes and hearing with my own ears the aircraft and their noises. I was really frightened and didn't dare to look. I covered myself fully under the blanket, and blocked my ears to hear nothing more.

Then I slept, probably due to the extreme fear.

While waking up, I did not hear the air craft noises, but saw a naval ship behind.

Later I was told that when the cargo ship found that she was attacked by pirates, she contacted the Japanese navy. Japan had sent naval ships and air craft to the scene, rescuing the affected ship...

During the conflict, the naval ship communicated with the pirates. She responded that 26 hostages – crew members of our vessels, would be all killed if the navy made any brutal acts.

However, the navy required the pirates to proceed straight to the island without delay...

The pirates obeyed the requirement.

Nevertheless, we were utterly miserable because of the actions of the pirates.

That was the start only, uncle. They resumed torturing us in different ways.

Let me continue to tell you.

During our return to the island, when the vessel was close to it, the fuel ran out. The vessel could not sail any more. They required the chief engineer to take every measure to start the engine to get to the island. The chief engineer answered that it was impossible to navigate once no oil remains on board.

Disagreeing with the chief engineer's explanation, they commanded him to be in his own cabin and he was terribly beaten. I, in my cabin underneath, repeatedly heard the heart-rending cries. Sometimes the cries were so terrible they made me really frightened. The crying ceased later as the chief engineer had been beaten unconscious.

Then, the remaining crew members all kept silent without any whisper or cough or even body movement, uncle.

And then I imagined the day when I, in turn, would suffer such painful tortures.

Although being prepared to bear the painful tortures, the fears did not decrease, they even increased.

It was difficult to describe the feeling of fear at that time, uncle.

And in the following morning they instructed us to make the engine operate by all means. Otherwise, we would be beaten as the chief engineer was.

And we all trusted the 2<sup>nd</sup> engineer... He told us that the only measure is to open all the fuel oil tanks to collect the possible remaining oil.

And we immediately detected the oil.

We were really happy to find out the oil remained in tanks.

All small and large fuel tanks from bow to stern along the vessel were opened.

The oil collected was luckily enough to navigate to the island.

While collecting oil, I have chance to drop in on the chief engineer. Having seen him, I did not really believe what I saw.

He was so brutally beaten that his face was terribly swollen, his eyes were unable to open and his hands and legs were paralysed and unable to feel.

Eventually, the vessel had reached the island to and used all the oil. Thank God!

Nobody knew what could have happened if we had not found enough oil.

During the time of being in captivity on the island, we sometimes had fish in meals in the early days. But later the fish were tainted owing to oil running out and the refrigerator ceased to operate.

Facing that fact, we thought of finding small wires to make hooks to fish.

I was very surprised that there were lots of fish in the seas round the island, uncle.

I regretted that the pirates did not allow us to fish long.

Having fished for a short time, they forced us to stop fishing and come back to captivity.

Those who were skillful could catch 1 or 2 fish; the unlucky persons could catch no fish.

Sometimes they did not allow us to fish, but we did fish.

In this case, if any one was caught by the pirates, he was punished. He was beaten then left standing outside under the terrible Somalian sun.

At first, having been beaten, we were frightened but gradually we got used to it.

The mouldy and smelly rice spurred us on to catch fish and the fish soup really helped us to easily consume the rice, uncle.

At about 9.00 PM our vessel's anchor was dragging therefore we all were mobilised to deal with it. Unfortunately, the windlass was out of action.

Therefore we had to handle the winch to slowly heave the anchor chain.

Finally the anchor was picked up above water surface, and the vessel moved to another position to drop anchor.

But the anchor dragged again and it was heaved up again and again...

Until the sun rose.

We stayed awake the whole night to find out measures to have the anchor attached the ground.

Various efforts were undertaken, but in vain.

At 5 PM, I was getting so tired...

My duty was to jump down, swim to the anchor, dive to fix the cable to the anchor at each time of heaving up of the anchor. Such actions were repeated so many times that made me exhausted.

While being in my cabin, I heard a strange sound outside and then the vessel was tilted on its side. I went out and saw that the vessel had drifted ashore and run aground.

The pirates and skipper took all measures to move away but in vain.

And the vessel got deeper and deeper aground.

And we prepared personal luggages to leave the vessel ashore, but the pirates warned that those who jump overboard shall be shot.

Then we all obeyed the pirates to stay at the bow until sunset.

While the vessel got aground, the sea was so boisterious that we feared that the vessel might capsize.

But we could do nothing when we were forced to remain aboard. Probably they supposed they might not control us if we went in different directions, at different positions.

And the time passed, the sun was rising. No bad things happened...

The pirates sent a motorboat to transfer us ashore.

In spite of the rough sea and difficult transfer, fortunately every thing was well done.

An uninhabited house was provided for us to stay in.

I saw the old people and children when we went from the sea shore. Uncle, they were black, might be wives, children and relatives of the pirates.

We commenced the new lives ashore without thinking of returning to our vessel. Nobody could expect...

Some days later they required us to come on board and bring every thing ashore.

The biggest job was to carry the generators.

At first we did not know how to.

We thought more and more, and we found a way of carrying the generators ashore.

It took lots of our time, brainpower and manpower to move the generators from the engine room to the main deck. Furthermore, we had to carry them on a long way crossing a sand bank up to the pirates' families.

Now it feels strange once I recall this event.

Sometimes they made us carry iron bars heavier than our bodyweight.

Once I said I cannot carry it alone...

They responded that they did not care, but I have to carry once they forced us to. If I could not carry, I was beaten.

Then it was very sunny, each of us wore nothing but a trouser cut shorter, above the knees, we were covered by fuel and lubricating oil, black, we looked like slaves...

Then I thought if I meet them again, I only force them to run on the sand bank under sunshine and that would be enough.

I felt resentful at the pirates' inhuman treatment.

We had to wake up early to work until late afternoon.

We found some rolls of string and we thought we should make a net to catch fish.

In day time, we worked on board. In the afternoon, should we leave the vessel early, we knitted the nets.

There was no electricity in the uninhabited house but we took the batteries and bulbs from the vessel to light the house during the nights.

It took me one week to make a net.

On the first day we were very anxious to catch fish with the net, wanting to have fish to eat.

During working on board, we asked the pirates to allow two crew members to go fishing.

They deliberated for a while, then agreed.

We were very happy.

But it was not easy to fish, uncle.

The sea is rough, but we are very good at swimming.

We caught a considerable number of small fishes on the first day and we were very satisfied. And we had a very delicious dinner.

We fished for some days. On one day, the sea was very rough and the net was lost and we felt very sad for that.

And we started to knit another net.

But later the pirates stop allowing us to fish any more. They told that the sea was so rough that may kill the fishermen and should the hostages die, the pirates could not take the ransom.

We once again took meals with the single steamed smelly and mouldy rice.

Later the rice ration was less and less, we were more and more hungry.

And when we brought the last generator ashore...

One day the pirates came, requiring the skipper to go out to meet them. Then we heard the loud cries. We saw the pirates beating, torturing the skipper.

They pressed the skipper to phone the ship owner to require the early delivery of ransoms, otherwise the seafarers would die. They passed the phone to the skipper to talk with the ship owner.

The ship owner answered that the required ransoms were too high.

That meant that the ship owner can not redeem us.

All the hopes and confidences were brought to ruin just right after a phone call.

We became terribly disappointed.

And we were really sad.

I wondered myself if my life would end there on the island.

So how could I carry out my own dreams and desires?

And also a lot of things that I have not experienced?

And the moment of disappointment elapsed.

And on following days I comforted myself that I should not lose my confidence.

I was still breathing, I should resume having confidence.

Because my parents and relatives were waiting for me to be back.

Since then I felt less fear, uncle.

The pirates sometimes gave us goats, and we had very good meals in those days.

On the contrary, they would torture us once the requirements for ransoms were refused...

The skipper sometimes told them that they are human beings, and so are we. Every one has a human heart, but why do they so terribly torture us?

The pirates answered that they are different from us...

In an early morning at about 3.00 o'clock, the skipper, chief engineer and engineering officer were taken out. Uncle, do you know that we, like the chickens losing their mother, did not dare to sleep, but wished our colleagues would come back.

And the sun set, then the skipper and engineers came back.

Questioned where they had been taken, the skipper said that the pirates feared that other gangs of pirates would come to take the hostages therefore they could hide the key hostages first.

Later we were moved deep into the bush...

On that day while sleeping, we were awoken to move on.

We supposed we were leaving and coming back early as the skipper and other colleagues did some days ago.

But nobody could have foreseen.

They led us to a place very far from the uninhabited house, in the forest...

We lived under the shadow of an old tree.

We started to lead a new life...

While we might take bath twice a week before... we only washed once a week here because it was difficult to carry water.

At night time, the cold wind blew, we had to huddle together to keep warm to sleep.

We got cold at nights and hungry in the day time.

We waited for meals all the time.

We were provided with wheat flour, which we fried ourselves then distributed as two small fried cakes. Then we waited until late afternoon to have a small bowl of rice for each of us.

Sometimes some seafarers suggested the skipper ask the pirates to increase the meal rations, otherwise they could shoot us.

And they told us that we should be left hungry so that they would more quickly receive the ransom.

We felt that if the ship owner does not pay the amount as indicated by the pirates, and the pirates do not release us, we would not be able to survive.

We wished that they might do anything to us, even torturing or beating, provided they gave us enough food.

Sometimes, while detecting a grasshopper, we ran out to catch it although we were prohibited to leave the tree shadow.

When being so hungry, everyone ate anything and caught it regardless of being beaten or tortured....

Sometimes in the afternoon I thought of and dreamt of some day we would be set free, but wondered if that day would ever come...

And while living in the forest, we were continuously moving place to place.

Once right after coming to a place, an aircraft flew across and we were forced to leave immediately...

Now it is interesting to recall those days, it was like doing military exercises, regardless of the day or night time.

Once some seafarers were led out to make phone calls. On the way back, I saw and heard wolves.

Early some mornings, we got up and saw herds of wild pigs. We wanted to hunt them very much, but the pirates did not let us...

On some days they fetched water that was a strange liquid...

It was a terrible kind of liquid.

It was either bitter or ... disgusting. If we did not drink we would be thirsty. If we drank, we got pains in our stomachs the whole night until our stomachs were empty.

We called that kind of liquid "holy water". Extremely terrible, uncle.

Sometimes it rained, and left water in some holes, and we used that water for cooking and drinking.

A boiled water pot gave us only half a pot of drinkable water, the rest was mud.

I am afraid you do not believe me, because I do not believe it myself when I remember it.

There were 12 Vietnamese seafarers aboard our vessel.

On one day the pimples appeared on Tam's body. We helped him to detect what caused the pimples.

Firstly we supposed Tam had been bitten by insects and that the insects had laid eggs. We took something out and were surprised that it was a maggot.

That was unbelievable!

Then some others got maggots similarly as Tam did.

And more people got likewise.

It's unbelievable that maggots lived in human bodies.

We wondered ourselves whether we would be completely alive on the day of being freed.

Time passed day by day, and we were getting more and more hopeless.

We resigned ourselves to our terrible circumstances. We could do nothing to change our lives.

And the dreamed of day was coming at last.

One day, an interpreter came. We gathered. He asked what we were most dreaming of...

We all cried aloud that we dreamed of being released at once. Then he asked whether we believed that he could help us to make our dream to become a reality.

We were all surprised at his question...

He requested our silence to hear him. We kept silent and were very anxious, praying for what he told us would be the best as we had dreamed.

He told us that we would all be freed on the next day. Nobody would be in captivity as the pirates had accepted the ransom amount paid by the shipowner.

We embraced each other and cried with happiness.

He congratulated us for having undergone a long and suffering endurance.

I could never forget that happy moment.

In the afternoon that day we all ate nothing and we woke up without sleeping to wait for the sunrise.

The feeling was indescribable, uncle.

And the sun rose, the pirates sent a truck to carry us.

We were separated into two groups.

The skipper and officers were taken to one place and the remaining seafarers to another.

Questioned why they acted this way, the pirates said that the skipper and officers were taken to the location where the aircraft would come to drop the ransom.

We would come there after completion of receiving money.

We anxiously waited until noon when a phone call reached us. After this discussion, the pirates told us that the ransom had been transferred, and we would go to the location.

We were very happy to meet the skipper and officers again.

We saw a naval ship which would likely carry us after we were released.

The pirates left immediately after finishing phone exchanges with the naval ship.

We waved the clothes to attract the the ship's attention.

We shouted ourselves hoarse.

If we were not taken away by the naval ship in next 2 hours, it would be a very dangerous situation.

Furthermore, we were really exhausted as we had eaten nothing for a day.

Suddenly the pirates came, they gave the skipper a phone set to talk and they left again. The skipper said that the naval ship had seen us. We had to wait for the motorboats to come.

Unfortunately the sea was very rough.

Then we saw two motorboats of the Chinese navy.

When the motorboats arrived, their engines were stopped and they drifted ashore.

Finally they sent a helicopter to pick up us to take us to the naval ship.

We really believed that we had been freed when being put aboard the military ship.

We felt as if we were in a dream.

The naval ship had to stay there the whole night to take back and repair the motorboats.

We were on board the Chinese military ship for three days. We went ashore in a port of Tanzania where three consulate officers waited and welcomed us.

The Vietnamese Embassy in Tanzania provided us with meals, clothing and accommodation. We stayed there for two days then flew for repatriation.

And I had come back home, really believed that I am alive and free to live in a normal human society.

In the first months, my way of life, attitude and manner differed more or less. People were surprised by the changes.

Generally I was in the state of light panic due to being in long captivity.

However I have learned much for myself owing to experiencing a piracy incident and life in piracy captivity.

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Uncle, tomorrow my colleagues and I will depart the port, bound for open sea to catch fish.

I had sworn not to work as a seafarer any more once I was released from captivity.

But now I have broken this oath.

I am unable to find another job ashore in Vietnam to earn enough for life.

I have no better choice of resuming seafaring as I suppose each person has his own fate. What is done cannot be undone. We should not fear.

Thank you, uncle, for having attentively listened.

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