

*Refugee Begins Trip Home; Wong Racom, 48, who was stranded at LAX for weeks on his way back to Vietnam last fall, bids his friends farewell and resumes his journey. Los Angeles Times February 12, 2005 Saturday*

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**HEADLINE: Refugee Begins Trip Home;  
Wong Racom, 48, who was stranded at LAX for weeks on his way back to Vietnam last fall, bids his friends farewell and resumes his journey.**

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For over a month the stranded Vietnamese refugee slept and ate in the Los Angeles International Airport terminal.

So it was a nostalgic moment when Wong Racom strolled one last time this week through the Tom Bradley International Terminal to at last catch a plane for home.

Airport workers who befriended the homesick Montagnard villager last September, when they noticed him sleeping on a terminal bench, were there to say goodbye.

So were LAX administrators who found temporary housing for him and pulled strings to expedite the replacement of his lost travel documents.

As the 48-year-old refugee prepared to board a Thai Airways plane on the first leg of his trip home, workers pressed gifts into his hands -- including \$95 gathered in one last collection on his behalf.

Still, airport staffers were hoping that they won't see Racom ever again.

"I'll miss you. I'll miss everyone," Racom said as he tugged at a black duffel bag stuffed so full that it wouldn't zip shut. "But I'm glad to leave. I'll be glad to meet my family again."

Last September and October it was an unexpected family of airport police, airline employees and others who work at the Bradley Terminal who came to Racom's rescue.

He and two friends had left a Vietnamese refugee resettlement camp in North Carolina in hopes of returning home when his LAX adventure began.

Visa problems prevented the trio from boarding their flight, although Racom's friends -- Nhuih Ksor, 40, and his brother-in-law, Hom Ksor, 51 -- were eventually able to catch a plane to Cambodia, by way of Taiwan.

But Racom had lost his refugee passport and North Carolina identification card, which were required for boarding an international flight. And on Sept. 20 he found himself stranded in the Bradley Terminal.

Workers soon noticed him and began giving him meals at the terminal's Hamada restaurant.

"They bought him food twice a day for 3 1/2 weeks -- cops and airport people," said server Faviola Ochoa. Racom would point at the entrees to indicate which he wanted, she said. "Poor dude. I'm rooting for him to get home."

Airport police found a row of benches near a security checkpoint for him to safely sleep on at night. Police Sgt. Vince Garcia summoned a Vietnamese-speaking LAX telecommunications department worker, Trien Nguyen, who was able to begin piecing together Racom's hard-luck story.

The villager explained that he was a coffee farmer in Vietnam and a devout Christian. But when authorities arrested him for preaching Christianity he fled custody and escaped to Cambodia, where he ended up in a refugee center.

He was among 900 refugees who were resettled to North Carolina in 2002. There, Racom was put up in an apartment and hired as a laborer at a T.J. Maxx distribution center near Charlotte.

Homesick, he and the Ksors applied for travel documents and saved their money to buy \$635 return tickets to Vietnam. Against the advice of others in North Carolina's Vietnamese community, they abandoned their apartments and jobs and headed for Los Angeles.

It was here that Racom lost his papers and ID card.

When airport police learned of the travel-document problem, Garcia and other officers began collecting money to pay Racom's way to San Francisco, in case he needed to go there to replace the missing papers.

Nancy Castles, an LAX public relations administrator, arranged for the refugee to use shower facilities normally used by airport maintenance workers.

She also found a vacant terminal room with a cot where he could sleep.

By late October social workers at the LAX Traveler's Aid office had found lodging for Racom at an East Los Angeles-area homeless shelter.

"It's been the most unusual situation we've dealt with, and we've been at this airport since 1950," explained Christine Okinaga, director of Traveler's Aid volunteers.

In the meantime, Vietnamese-speaking LAX airport guide Cynthia Fuentes helped Racom fill out forms to apply for a replacement refugee passport from the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services agency.

Airport officials persuaded aides to Rep. Henry A. Waxman (D-Los Angeles) to help expedite processing of the application, shortening what normally is a nine-month process by nearly two-thirds.

Fuentes was there to say farewell to Racom when LAX telecom worker Nguyen drove him

from the shelter to the airport Wednesday.

So was Lacy Smith, superintendent of terminal operations at LAX, who likened the refugee's dilemma to that of Tom Hanks' character in last year's film "The Terminal." Except that "this one's a true story ... it isn't a movie," as Smith put it.

Grinning, Racom pulled his wallet from his pocket and fished out five small photographs. They were of his son and four daughters, who range in age from 7 to 21.

"I haven't seen them in four years," he told Fuentes in Jerai, the Montagnard dialect.

Castles asked that the refugee's departure not be publicized until today, when presumably he has passed through Laos into Vietnam.

She said those in the Vietnamese resettlement community believe that Racom will be rearrested when he returns home because authorities in Vietnam were aware of the trio's intentions before they even left North Carolina.

The refugee grapevine has reported that both Ksors have already been taken into custody, she said.

As Racom waited for his flight, Castles handed him a stuffed animal that her 7-year-old daughter, Laura, gave to take to his own 7-year-old. And she gave him the airport workers' \$95 farewell gift.

"I have money to take the bus" from Laos to Vietnam, he said, smiling broadly. "But I'd walk if I have to."

Displaying a worn Jerai-language Bible with a cover held together by Band-Aids, he expressed confidence that he would soon be reunited with his wife and children.

"I'm not afraid. God will protect me. I've been praying," he said as Fuentes translated. "Thank you to everyone at the airport. I'm praying for God to bless every one of you."

Soon, Racom turned and walked toward his plane. He didn't look back.