My Indochinese Refugee Program 1979-81

Reminiscences by David Ritchie
In early 1979, I was cross-posted from the orderly Dutch immigration of The Netherlands to Southeast Asia and the humanitarian crisis washing up on the beaches of Singapore, Malaysia & Indonesia.
You want me do what?

• Within a week of my arrival, my Officer in Charge, Ian Hamilton, temporarily put the entire normal immigration program under my charge.

• He also took me on an introductory tour of Malaysia’s refugee camps.
Peninsular Malaysia
The east coast of peninsular Malaysia
350 miles & 12 hours driving from Singapore to the Thai border
Conservative backwater poverty
Muslim Sultanates all the way to the Thai border.
Palm oil and rubber tree plantations
Beaches and sleepy fishing villages
Ottawa thought there were 10,000 refugees on the coast. In early ’79 there were already more than twice that number – many in temporary sites close to where the boats made land-fall.
Monsoon seas and Pulau Bidong wreckage
Refugees on Bidong referred to their life on the island as “bi dat” – a play on words meaning “was tragic”

Soon there would be 44,000
Cherating camp was a hell-hole. Barbed-wire and guard towers prevented anyone from reaching the nearby surf. Refugees were arriving by the hundreds weekly to crowd under the flimsy shelters baking on the hot, flea-infested beach outside Kuantan.
Pulau Tengah
At first glance, Tengah’s white sands beaches were still almost beautiful
Until you remembered where you were
For me...not in Holland anymore

• After my first trip through the Malaysian camps, I wrote to my former O.I.C. back in The Hague... “visited 5 camps in 4 days – 2 planes, 600 miles driving, 10 hours by boat on the South China Sea with 598 refugees selected for Canada.”

• This total was about 50% larger than Canada’s annual immigrant visa issuance from the Netherlands.
“The sparkle in their eyes”
Building Indonesia – early 1980

- I took part in two early aspects of consolidating Indonesia’s far-flung and largely forgotten nine camps.
- One was to go far across the busy Singaporean harbour to the neighbouring Indonesian province of Riau and the seedy old smugglers port of Tanjung Pinang.
Tanjung Pinang
The Yacht Club

ROYAL
Tanjung Pinang
YACHT CLUB
Lorong Merdeka IV 513D
Telp. 21975

PATRON : HER MAJESTY THE QUEEN
Dengue, malaria & conjunctivitis
Machetes & mosquitos
And then 160 miles across open seas to the Anambas...
Galang - purpose-built for the long-term
Sometimes a very long wait...
Refugee trauma...diffused by refugee humour.
Galang, Indonesia

Populations of up to 50,000 – perhaps a quarter million Vietnamese transited before its final closure in 1996.