



NEW BEDFORD FISHING HERITAGE CENTER

Date of Interview: June 07, 2024

Name of Narrator: Giao Van Dang

Name of Interviewer: Ngoc Giau Tran

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This oral history was produced in 2024 as part of the *Casting a Wider Net Oral History Project* conducted by New Bedford Fishing Heritage Center.

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Background Information:

- **Name of person interviewed:** Giao Van Dang
- **Age:**
- **Gender:** Male
- **Occupation:** Retired scalloper
- **Ethnicity:** Vietnamese

Interviewer: Ngoc Tran

Translator: Ngoc Tran

Observer(s): Laura Orleans

Transcriber: Ngoc Tran, reviewed by Kathleen Le

Interview location: New Bedford Fishing Heritage Center

Date of interview: June 07, 2024

Language(s) the interview was conducted in: Vietnamese

Key Words:

Scalloping, diving, fishing, factory, fisherman, scalloper, refugee, boat exodus, Vietnam war, New Bedford, Boston, Phú *Quý*, island, net, boat.

Abstract:

Giao Van Dang was a scalloper who left his homeland of Vietnam as a part of the boat exodus after the Vietnam war. Like the other refugees in the boat, Giao fled the country with the hopes of finding better opportunities. Through hard work and determination, Giao was able to carve out a life for himself in America, returning to the ocean that he loved. Giao is currently happily retired and still stays connected to the ocean.

Notes:

Phú *Quý* is most likely referring to Pulau Kuku, located in the Indonesian part of the Anambas Islands.

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[00:00] Giao talks about his childhood and how he became a fisherman.

[4:15] Giao talks about his journey to America. He speaks about leaving his family as a part of the boat exodus, his experiences at the refugee camps, and the length in which he had to wait to be screened and interviewed.

[8:05] Giao talks about how he arrived in Boston in 1983, where he found work at a spinach factory. He then discusses how, after working there for a few years, he found his way to New Bedford and began searching for a job as a fisherman. He talks about how, despite not having any experience or connections, he was still able to find his way to the ocean and secure his place on a boat as a scalloper.

[13:05] Giao talks about how different scallop catching is in the US compared to Vietnam. He shares that it was a lot more dangerous in Vietnam and was only 15 years of age when he started. He discusses how, with barely any equipment, he would dive for scallops in shorts and a t-shirt and that this was the norm in Vietnam.

[17:40] Giao shares that during the off season, he keeps himself occupied by going fishing. He talks about how he truly loves fishing and finds joy in it.

[21:48] Giao talks about how working as a fisherman was and still is a laborious job. According to Giao “...it was hard here; it was hard in Vietnam.”

[24:00] Giao talks about the work that needs to be done on the boat before they could go out to sea. He discusses how many men he worked alongside with and who still scallops in present day.

[31:25] End of Audio

Full Transcript

[00:05-04:10]

Ngoc Tran: (In English) Today is the 7th of June, 2024. We are at New Bedford Fishing Heritage Center. My name is Ngoc Tran. I am interviewing Giao Dang. This interview is part of the New Bedford Fishing Heritage Center's Casting a Wider Net project. The audio recording and transcript from this interview will become a part of the center's archive and the NOAA VOICES archive and may be used to develop future projects, publications, and exhibits.

N.T: (In Vietnamese) Can you please say your name?

Giao Dang: My name, full name, name and age, full name?

N.T: Yes, your full name.

G.D: Giao Van Dang.

N.T: (In English) Do I need to say that I am starting the interview?

Laura Orleans: You can say anything and switch right over to Vietnamese.

N.T: Okay. (In Vietnamese) I will begin by asking you about your past, starting at your childhood before you came here. When you were in Vietnam, what age did you start fishing?

G.D: I was 15 years old.

N.T: 15 years old. At that time were most of your family fishermen?

G.D: Yes.

N.T: Would you like to share some stories or experiences that you can recall from your childhood during your fishing trip(s)?

G.D: When I was fishing, I drove my family boat. I would fish, dive for scallops. That's all.

N.T: When you went out to fish or scallop, how long was each trip?

G.D: When I go scalloping, I come back within the day. If it was a fishing trip, sometimes it'd be a week.

N.T: Would you like to share some stories you have, sad or joyful, anything works, when recalling memories from your childhood?

G.D: Childhood is always joyful. [Laughter]. Whenever you're with friends it is always fun.

N.T: Can you elaborate a bit on any stories of fishing trips you went on while in Vietnam?

G.D: Fishing is just diving under, diving in the clear water. You'll see each other under the water while diving, diving with each other, it was a fun time.

N.T: When you would go on a fishing trip, it'd just be your family right?

G.D: No, there'd be friends and other people. There'd be people outside the family.

N.T: Every time you'd take a trip, how many people would go?

G.D: About five people.

N.T: When you went out, who taught you how to fish or dive for scallops?

G.D: In the past when I took my family boat, it was my old man who taught me.

N.T: So it was your father?

G.D: Yes.

N.T: As a young boy, you had always wanted to catch fish?

G.D: Yes.

[4:15- 8:04]

N.T: I will now transition to your journey coming here. When you came here, what did your journey look like?

G.D: After the end of the war, I fled the country by boat.

N.T: Can you share the stories? Would you like to share?

G.D: I fled the country by boat. It took 3 days and 4 nights until we reached the island Phú Quý.

N.T: Which island is that?

G.D: Phú Quý Island. It's called Phú *Quý* Island, I'm not entirely sure if that is the name. It's in Indonesia. I stayed on Phú *Quý* for... 1 month and...16 days. Then I went to Galang.

N.T: Still in Indonesia?

G.D: Galang is in Indonesia also, yes. I stayed there for a year and a half. I went to... Indonesia...in the month of...May...yes May...I stayed there for a year and a half to...a year and a half and then I went to America. I went to America, it was the year '83...May 5th, 1983 I arrived in America.

N.T: During that one year that you were there, what was working like? Did they help you?

G.D: No, we just stayed there. We stayed there and waited until the interview; we didn't do anything. On the weekend they would make us pick grass. [Laughter].

N.T: Do you have any stories while you were there that you'd like to share?

G.D: No I don't have any stories, no stories to be shared. It was very boring there.

N.T: This is your story, you can share what you are comfortable with.

G.D: [Laughter]. Okay I'll share, it was sad there. The food rations weren't enough, just very sad. All of them [other refugees], not just me.

N.T: This is your story; you are the person of interest.

G.D: [Laughter].

N.T: When you fled by boat, did your mom and dad come with you, siblings?

G.D: No.

N.T: So you went by yourself?

G.D: Yes. The boat I went on had 13 people.

N.T: Do you recall what year that was?

G.D: When I fled? I fled May 14th...year...May 14th, '82.

N.T: When you left like that, did your family try to stop you?

G.D: I sneaked out. [Laughter].

N.T: So no one knew?

G.D: Yes.

N.T: When you were in the refugee camp, did the people...were you able to send word back home to your family or send a letter to let them know?

G.D: When I got to the camp? I did.

N.T: You did?

G.D: When I had arrived at the camp...

N.T: While you were in the refugee camp, how did they select you to go to America? Did they let you choose to go to another country or only [America].

G.D: No, only America...when I did the interview only America accepted me. There were no other countries.

[8:05- 9:10]

N.T: So when you got to America, which state did you go to?

G.D: I went to Boston, I went here.

N.T: In the program that enabled you to come here, could you share any experiences when you were able to arrive in America? What was that like?

G.D: What experiences? When I got here, I stayed home for about a year. I went to school for a bit, then I went to work. When I was in Boston, I worked in a factory...the factory processed...one of the leafy greens...I don't even know what they're called...it's called spinach...yes, spinach was the vegetable. I worked with that vegetable at the factory. After working at the factory, I came here [New Bedford] and started working as a fisherman.

N.T: So after one year, you were able to start fishing?

G.D: No, it was much longer than that. I worked at the factory until '89. I came here in '83 and by '84 I was already working.

[9:14- 13:05]

N.T: Did someone introduce you or how did you get into fishing [in New Bedford]?

G.D: Fishing? During that time, I went [to the port] and walked around. In the past, they were still taking a lot of people out [to sea]. I just went down there and asked, they accepted, and I just started.

N.T: So at the time you just went down [to the port] and searched for a boat? You looked by yourself?

G.D: Yes.

N.T: No one who introduced you?

G.D: No.

N.T: Who did you learn scalloping from or was it from experience?

G.D: The captain taught me...the American captain.

N.T: The captain?

G.D: Yes.

N.T: So they accepted you and taught you?

G.D: Yes they taught me how to do it.

N.T: During your time working as a scalloper, are there any sad or funny stories you would like to share?

G.D: Goodness, when I was fishing I didn't have happiness. I didn't have sadness [Laughter]. Honestly, I don't think I have happy [stories] or sad.

N.T: So you were working just to make it by?

G.D: I only wished to work to deliver a lot of scallops and make a lot of money. [Laughter].

N.T: Can you describe what your day looked like when you were on the boat out at sea? Did you bring your own food or cook on the boat?

G.D: The boat [captain] buys the food. The day is split into four shifts. Each shift is six hours. We work for six hours, then sleep and rest for six hours, and repeats. Someone would cook...it'd be the captain or the first mate. When we finished our shift, the food would be ready and then we'd go to sleep. When it was time, they would wake us up to work again. Just that.

N.T: Do you ever feel over worked?

G.D: No, in the past it wasn't like that. Only today is like that, not in the past. It depends on the boat as well, not all boats are like that. On some boats you would work a lot. Some boats, the one that I worked on did that.

N.T: That is pretty good then.

G.D: I would work eight hours, sometimes six, then rest for six hours.

N.T: So the boat that you worked on, scallop was the main catch or was it quahog?

G.D: Scallop. The boat I worked on only did scallop.

N.T: So over the years you never caught fish? Only scallop?

G.D: No, only scallops. I only fish near the shore.

N.T: So you catch fish for fun then?

G.D: Yes, fishing is very fun.

N.T: So every time you go on a scalloping trip, how long are you out at sea for?

G.D: In the past, when I just started...from...’92...or ’95...we went out for about two weeks. Later, it was around ten days. Today they still do 10-12 days because now they have inland trips, which wasn’t available in the past. They opened the inland trips, which only require a couple of days and then they come back in.

[13:05- 17:35]

N.T: Can you describe any distinct differences between scalloping here and back in Vietnam?

G.D: Very different, in Vietnam I dive. Here it’s easier they use a net to bring the scallops up and pour it out onto the boat. From there we would prepare the ice and pick through the scallops to ice them.

N.T: When you were in Vietnam and dove for scallops...can you share the process?

G.D: I went scalloping in the year...’80. In ’82 I fled Vietnam on the boats so I only scalloped for a year.

N.T: When you went out scalloping, what equipment did you bring?

G.D: We only brought food, then we went out and dove in the water, nothing else. When it was time we cooked. There were about 11 people that went. One person would watch the oxygen tank, five would dive first and the other five would wait on the boat. When the first five go up, the other five would then dive down.

N.T: Were there any dangers when you would dive like that? Can you compare here to Vietnam?

G.D: When it comes to danger, there’s danger everywhere. But diving in Vietnam is more dangerous than here.

N.T: Can you elaborate on the dangers?

G.D: The danger is when you are diving underwater. If there is an issue with the oxygen machine on the boat and it runs out of air, then that becomes dangerous. If they can't come up in time...they're done.

N.T: How is the air transferred?

G.D: There was a line like a straw...very long. Just like the one you use at home to drink water, but a bit smaller...Like this [pointing to a large Dunkin straw].

N.T: What about outerwear?

G.D: In Vietnam, just regular clothing. It's not cold like here, so we don't wear a wet suit. Just regular clothing, t-shirt and shorts. During the colder season, we would wear long pants to stay warm while we dove. No wet suit like here.

N.T: Can you explain more on the breathing tube? Do you just hold it in your mouth?

G.D: Yes. The machine releases oxygen and then you hold the tube in your mouth and you breathe.

N.T: When you're diving down, do the people waiting on the boat help? How do you know when to switch?

G.D: For switching, you watch the time. For example, one person will dive for a set amount of time and then come up. There's a big netted bag. When the bag is full, we'll tie it to a rope and someone on the boat will pull it up.

N.T: So how big is the basket?

G.D: The netted bag is different than a basket.

N.T: Oh so it's like a net?

G.D: Yes, a netted bag.

N.T: How big is it?

G.D: It's a 50kg bag [he shows with his hand about three feet in length]. The opening of the bag is round like this, about this size too, so the scallop doesn't come out [he points to the coffee cup, about 3 inches wide]. It's just that.

[17:40-21:40]

N.T: Let talk about the off season, since scalloping is a seasonal job. What do you do on the off season to keep yourself busy?

G.D: Fishing...[Laughter]. I go fishing for squid and fish.

N.T: Can you elaborate?

G.D: [Laughter]. I go fishing. [Shows pictures of his catches].

N.T: Would you like to share these pictures with the organizers so they can share them in the exhibit?

G.D: These pictures?

N.T: Yes, those are nice pictures. Can I show her this one? [shows Laura Orleans the picture]

L.O.:(in English) Wow! Is that a bass? Striped bass?

G.D: Yes.

N.T: (in Vietnamese) When you go out fishing, do you go in a group?

G.D: For fishing, I go by myself.

N.T: Would you like to share any stories you have while fishing?

G.D: When I go fishing and get a catch, I'm happy. For fishing, it must be the right size so you can keep it. If it isn't the correct size, they don't let you keep it. You can get in trouble if the size isn't right.

N.T: How do you know if it's the right size?

G.D: You measure it.

N.T: So every single time you have to measure. Squid season is in the fall?

G.D: It's this season.

N.T: Other than fishing, do you do anything else during your off season?

G.D: I just stay home. [Shows more pictures of his fishing trip]. These photos are so bad, I feel silly sharing. [Laughter].

N.T: (In English) [Laughter]. He is worrying about his appearance.

G.D: (In Vietnamese) This one is better.

N.T: Would you like to share that one for the exhibit as well?

G.D: Okay.

N.T: Can you explain more about the fishing and squid catching process?

G.D: I don't know how to explain it. I should have brought my bait with me to show.
[Laughter].

N.T: You don't have to get too technical with it...for instance...you can talk about how you prep for it...how long you wait on your boat for...

G.D: The fishing is done on shore.

N.T: Oh, you do it on the shore?

G.D: Yes, on the shore.

N.T: On a day like that, how long do you fish for?

G.D: Well, that depends, sometimes...there are other people [fishing as well] and we talk so that's fun. We stay if we can catch any fish. If there's no catch, I just go home. Nothing else much to that. [Laughter]. No need to stay long.

N.T: Do you have any funny encounters or stories from your time as a scalloper you would like to share?

G.D: No, I don't have anything funny. [Laughter]. Honestly, I really don't.

N.T: No one ever did something unexpected on the boat?

G.D: No one did anything. When we were out at sea, as soon as we finished working, we looked forward to eating and sleeping.

[21:48-24:00]

N.T: Now that you are retired, do you have anything you would like to share to new fishermen or someone who's interested? Any words of wisdom or advice?

G.D: No, I can't say. If they want to go...I don't have a say. [Laughter]. If I say the occupation is difficult work, they'll just say I am only saying that because I am retired. If people want to do it, they'll do it. The nature of being a fisherman here is just difficult work. In Vietnam it is hard work, but it is also hard work here. The fishing occupation is just difficult.

N.T: The fishing industry is a lot different in Vietnam than it is here. Do you have anything else you would like to share?

G.D: No I don't think so. [Laughter].

N.T: Do have any other fun or sad stories throughout your lifetime you would like to share?

G.D: No, I don't want to share those stories. [Laughter]. I wouldn't share happy or sad.

N.T: Any stories are welcome.

G.D: There is nothing happy...It just is.

[24:00- 31:25]

N.T: Can we talk more about your fishing trips then? What was the process like as you prepared for scalloping trips?

G.D: Before the trip, we'd go down to the boat for gear work. I would go down and prep the traps, tie the net, then lock chain...

N.T: Lock chain?

G.D: Lock chain...it's like the net there [the chain net at the museum]. I can show you in a moment. Locking the chain was to prevent the rocks from coming into the net.

N.T: What do you mean preventing rocks from coming in?

G.D: It's to prevent the large rocks from entering the net.

N.T: So they fall into the net?

G.D: Yes, so the rocks don't fall into the net and stay outside.

N.T: Can you explain the process?

G.D: It'd be easier for me to explain if I could demonstrate...For instance, you would put in the wire and tighten it with a cycle.

N.T: And this is all for the net?

G.D: Yes, for the net so we can release it into the ocean.

N.T: Explain more!

G.D: [Laughter]. Then on the back you would tie the twine top...

N.T: What is a twine top?

L.O.: Oh twine top.

G.D: Yes, yes.

L.O.: It is a part of the scallop net.

G.D: That's it, nothing else.

N.T: What was the length of time that would take?

G.D: It depends on how broken the gears are. It's hard to say. Sometimes it's 3-4 hours, while other times it could take until noon. It really depends. If we don't finish, we come back the next day and then we leave the following day.

N.T: Does it ever interfere with the schedule?

G.D: Mhm. When we're out at sea, if the net gets damaged by the rocks, we have to fix it during the trip, as well.

N.T: Is that process much harder when you are out at sea?

G.D: Much harder due to the weather and wind. The boat is constantly moving and rocking, so the gears and net are not still. It's very difficult.

N.T: Has anything unexpected ever occur when you're out at sea? Things that you thought weren't possible?

G.D: No, I never had anything eventful happen on my trips.

N.T: Here and in Vietnam?

G.D: Yeah, everywhere was the same...because when you meet people you know [the stories], but if you don't meet them you'll never know if any issues arose.

N.T: So on your trips specifically, there were never any unexpected issues?

G.D: No.

N.T: Are you comfortable talking about pay?

G.D: When we come into the port, profits are split. Profits in the past were split...4:6. After the boat takes their costs out, the rest is split between everyone. That's all.

N.T: Did you ever help with selling?

G.D: No, just scalloping.

N.T: Splitting profits 4:6. The 40% is split how?

G.D: 40% to the boat, 60% to the crew.

N.T: So however many people went, the 60% was split between them?

G.D: Yes.

N.T: Can we touch base what you said earlier about preparing to go out to sea...how many people were part of the crew?

G.D: In the past, in the year '89 until...I can't recall...maybe '95 or '97, there were 10 to 11 people on board. Then in the 2000s, there were only 7 people on board.

N.T: Do you recall the reason why they made that switch?

G.D: No, I don't know why. That's government stuff. [Laughter].

N.T: Do you want to share anything else about your time as a scalloper?

G.D: No, I think that's all. [Laughter].

N.T: Do you want to share anything about your fishing trips [for leisure]?

G.D: Fishing is fishing...I don't even go that often. When I'm bored, I'll take my fishing pole to have some fun. Nothing much to talk about. [Laughter].

N.T: This is your life story; your insight will let the audience know you a bit more.

G.D: Nothing much to say really. I'm now retired. When I'm feeling a bit bored, I'll take my fishing pole out. When I'm feeling good, I'll take my fishing pole home. [Laughter]. That's all.

N.T: Do you invite anyone to join you for fun?

G.D: I do invite friends sometimes or I'll go alone. I tend to go alone often.

N.T: I think that's about it for the interview. Would you like to share anything else before we end the interview?

G.D: No, that's about it. Thank you.

N.T: Thank you for sharing your story. If you recall anything else you would like to share, feel free to call me.

G.D: Okay.

L.O.:(in English) What does he remember about his very very first time on a fishing boat?

N.T: [Translates in Vietnamese].

G.D: (in Vietnamese) When I was younger, I loved going out. Now that I am older, I am tired of it. [Laughter].

L.O.:(in English) We did a little bit of learning about the Vietnamese community. Do most people come from Phu Quy?

N.T: (in Vietnamese) For fishing here, most people are from Dao Phu Quy?

G.D: Yes, that is correct.

L.O.:(in English) Is that where you come from?

G.D: Yeah.

L.O.:Seems like a lot of people ended up here.

G.D: Yeah, from Phu Quy.

L.O.:Were there many Vietnamese people already here?

N.T: [Translates in Vietnamese].

G.D: (in Vietnamese) No. When I came here...no one was here.

N.T: So when you came here, there weren't many Vietnamese people in our area?

G.D: Yeah, when I came there was little. There were a lot of Chinese people.

N.T: So on the boats there were a lot of Vietnamese people?

G.D: No, there were a lot of Chinese people. When I came, gas was only a couple of cents per gallon. Not even close to a dollar.

*Note by Kathleen: The Vietnamese words for boat and Chinese people are pronounced the same, causing the misunderstanding.

[End of Audio]