

# ASMA artist Darrel White's Painting celebrates rescue of Vietnamese refugees of 40 years ago!

Answering the call from New Zealand, RAN veteran and marine artist **Darrel White** ASMA contacted his brother Glenn, also an ex-RAN veteran and HARS\* volunteer, for help illustrating a Grumman Tracker for his painting. And there, literally right in front of him and one of his own restoration projects at HARS, an RAN Tracker 851 – its remarkable history previously all but forgotten.

On a stormy South China Sea, nearly 40 years ago, a carrier-based Royal Australian Navy (RAN) Grumman Tracker S-2G on its last circuit of the day spotted a Vietnamese refugee boat, possibly on fire, 10 miles west of the aircraft carrier HMAS Melbourne. After covering the Tracker's landing, a Wessex 31B rescue helicopter then rushed to the scene and hovered over the overcrowded 13.7 metre wooden boat. It had been adrift for two days with its engines broken down.

A boarding party and doctor arrived from the destroyer escort HMAS Torrens and over the next three hours of Sunday, 21 June 1981, the officers and sailors of HMAS Melbourne and HMAS Torrens brought a total of 99 exhausted and barely conscious men, women and children up the side and aboard the aircraft carrier.

Just five days later, the Vietnamese – officially-known as MG99 for Melbourne Group - were disembarked at Singapore, transferred to a refugee camp, quickly processed as migrants to Australia and arrived in Sydney before the HMAS Melbourne's return to base at Garden Island.

With the endless support of then-HMAS Melbourne Supply Officer John Ingram (now in Port Macquarie), the MG99 refugees, settled mostly in Sydney and led by Stephen Nguyen, kept in touch and held reunions with the ship's company in 2007 and 2012. But only this past January, the story of this little-known rescue suddenly burst open in a remarkable coincidence involving the HARS Aviation Museum at Albion Park, NSW, following the commissioning of a naval painting of the moment Tracker 851 spotted the stricken 13.7-metre Nghia Hung on that last patrol under dark, stormy skies.

The discovery of Tracker 851 among the aviation museum's large collection of historic military aircraft sparked a rapid sequence of events. First, led by Stephen Nguyen and boat captain Nguyen Van Tam, over 40 refugees and family were joyously re-united with Tracker 851 and a Wessex similar to the "Pedro 15" involved in their rescue, at HARS on 13 March. 19: In turn, that visit has led to a much-larger 40th Anniversary Reunion at HARS Aviation Museum, Albion Park, NSW, on SUNDAY, 20 JUNE 2021, 1300-1600 (1-4pm,) also World Refugee Day.

The organisers are hopeful of 200-250 attending, refugees and their descendants and other Vietnamese Australians, plus a large number of former RAN officers, air crew and sailors from both ships who took part and now tracked down, including four who were in stunning photographs of the rescue.

For most, the reunion will be the first time they've seen the refugees since their rescue. The purpose of the Reunion is for MG99 to honour and thank all members of the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) involved in their rescue at sea 40 years ago on 21 June 1981. Australian High Commission diplomatic officers and staff for their assistance in Singapore. HARS Aviation Museum for its years-

long custody of Tracker 851 and its volunteers who served in South Vietnam in any capacity, including civilian aircrew in & out of country. And more generally, thanksgiving and honour to Australia for its welcome and the new lives and great success the nation has provided.

Using HARS Hangar One with Tracker 851 and Wessex 832 – as stand-in for Pedro 15 - in places of honour, the Reunion will feature a wide variety of events starting with a Moment of Silence to remember those who perished fleeing Vietnam and MG99 & RAN rescuers who've passed away; a fly-past by Tracker 844, sister aircraft of 851 on the HMAS Melbourne; UH1-B Huey 898; a salute to aircraft from the Vietnam War & HARS volunteers who served there; and then a program of reminiscences of the rescue and lives in Australia with entertainment and food provided.

**The official unveiling Darrell White's dramatic painting of the rescue will be the highlight of the reunion.**

**Details:** RAN rescuers & MG-99 free. Others \$50 donation to HARS.

For Ticket Payment [www.HARS.org.au](http://www.HARS.org.au). Click on Events.

*\*Historical Aircraft Restoration Society Inc.*