

# From Vietnam to ENG and Beyond

Alum makes long journey to a career in patent law

H.T. Than (ENG'85) owns a law firm, practices taekwondo, is a husband and father, and graduated from BU twice, with engineering and law degrees. Before he did all of these things, though, he escaped from Saigon when he was 12 years old, in the final, frantic wave of evacuees at the end of the Vietnam War.

"It was a pretty exciting few hours of my life," Than says of the chaotic two-day period when he, his siblings and their parents left their home—and a brother in the South Vietnamese army—to escape from Saigon on April 29, 1975. His brother had passed up an opportunity to escape with the family and returned to the front in what Than describes as "The most courageous act that I have ever witnessed."

As the North Vietnamese military swarmed southward and the U.S. ramped up its whirlwind evacuation, Than and his family waited at the Saigon airport. They watched as a bomb hit a plane on the runway, dashing their hopes of escaping on the next flight, and found shelter in a ditch for the next night and day as bombs fell nearby.

"We could see the North Vietnamese were about to overrun the airport and the retreating South Vietnamese soldiers running through it. We saw soldiers from my brother's battalion, but no one knew where my brother was," Than says. "People were yelling and screaming. We looked up in the sky, and there were a bunch of American choppers overhead."

He and his sisters ran for the helicopters. In the pushing and jostling, the children lost their parents, but got on a helicopter. As the sun set, the helicopters took off and flew over the South China Sea.



H.T. Than (ENG'85)

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"I still remember the name of the aircraft carrier we landed on. It was the USS *Hancock*. The wind from the blades was so fierce it grabbed hold of me and I thought I was going to fall in the ocean, but there was a ring of U.S. sailors surrounding the chopper and I slammed right into one of them," remembers Than.

He has walked a much steadier path since arriving in the U.S., earning bachelor's and master's degrees in mechanical engineering and spending a brief stint as a petroleum engineer for Exxon. He then returned to BU for his law degree and, eight years ago, after seven years at a large New York-based law firm, he started his own firm in Washington, DC, the H.T. Than Law Group.

Than's family—he eventually did find his parents on the aircraft carrier—settled in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and Than gravitated towards math and science at school because he could understand them before he knew English well.

"I remember attending seventh grade and I didn't speak a word of English," he says. "I was put right into the classroom, and the first few weeks were sheer terror. I would have to translate the homework from English to Vietnamese and try to do it in Vietnamese, and then translate it back."

When Than arrived at BU to study engineering, he felt lost at the large university, but his suitemates quickly became lifelong friends, he met his future wife, Kim (ENG'87), and he encountered helpful professors.

"A lot of universities are after the grants, research, publications—you need those—but equally important is the love of teaching lowly undergrads. I really appreciated Mort Isaacson because he very much cares about that," Than recalls.

Than was particularly challenged during a project using small Data General computers for laboratory data acquisition, recalls Associate Professor Isaacson (ME).

"No documentation came with the computers, and they were clunky machines, but H.T. persevered. I remember seeing him in the lab, struggling away, always with a smile on his face, always an optimistic outlook," says Isaacson.

In his work today, Than says, "I did not think I would need engineering again when I went to law school, but I use it every day—last week I had to open up my thermodynamics book to figure out why an invention works."

He has worked on patents for fuel cell cartridges for Bic (a company more famous for its pens), polymer compounds for Titleist golf balls, and polymers in Benjamin Moore paints. One of his toughest cases involved an alleged patent infringement on a device that filters donated blood.

"I had to cross-examine several PhDs in chemistry. I had to understand the finer points of the invention to try to get the exact story out of them. If you can't converse with them, you're not going to win."

Than keeps his firm humming along but has recently stepped back from the intensity of trial work to focus more on family.

For years, the family assumed Than's brother in the South Vietnamese army was dead, but he had survived, held prisoner in the jungles of Vietnam. He eventually came to the



H.T. Than at about age seven, in Saigon, Vietnam.

U.S. after his family sponsored him through a government program.

"A few days before my wedding in 1991 I saw him for the first time in 16 years," says Than. "I have never heard him complain or be bitter about the lost years. I have been trying to live up to his examples. In a way, he is a big part of who I am."

H.T. and Kim Than have two sons and a daughter; the family goes fishing and hiking and does taekwondo together.

"I have been very, very blessed to be living in the U.S. and have the opportunities I do, and I have a pretty strong love for the U.S. Navy."