

Operation USA & Vietnam

...40 YEARS LATER

It was early summer 1979 when Richard Walden first had the idea: Grounded but still functional airplanes could be filled with supplies donated by American corporations and flown to the other side of the world for the Vietnamese “Boat People” refugees languishing off the coast of Malaysia. With just a few phone calls, a collaborative effort to assemble a historic airlift to a people in need was underway, and an NGO was born.

Operation USA (known as Operation California in the early days) was founded on agility and efficiency, with a commitment to collaboration that didn't yet exist in the early 1980s. Mr. Walden believed the restrictions and bureaucracy that came along with government funding were an unnecessary evil. The most effective way to maximize impact, he thought, was to facilitate connections between private donors and the people on the ground who were best equipped to distribute materials and implement programs. He was right: With a broad network of friends, classmates and colleagues in his Rolodex, and a natural talent for fundraising, he went on to deliver \$450 million in aid to 101 countries in the four decades since that first airlift—all the while remaining committed to the people of Vietnam through a variety of programs aimed at helping immigrants, bolstering hospitals, public health and agriculture, and empowering women.



Boat people will benefit from amateurs' tenacity



EMERGENCY 6 tons of boat people gear com... 707 is loaded with Vietnamese refu... attorney Richard Walden organized the relief project, which flew out of Los Angeles International Airport and was jointly sponsored by the American Red Cross and Operation California. Times photo by Ken Luban



Richard Walden, left, and Llewellyn Werner loading first pallet of food to be flown to M...
By Ellen Futterman
Herald Ex-



“Operation California” airlifts food to refugees

ard Walden, a Los Angeles attorney, and Llewellyn Werner, a Los Angeles time aide to Gov. Edmund Brown Jr. Since its inception three weeks ago, the operation has drawn donations from about 25 corporations and help from various relief organizations and individuals. Yesterday, Walden and Werner and 10 aides worked for more than four hours loading the 12,000 pounds of supplies from a 20-foot trailer. After the loading was completed, the trailer was driven to a depot near Los Angeles International Airport. The supplies were to be loaded onto a Boeing 707 today and flown to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.



In 2020, because Vietnam's successful handling of COVID-19 resulted in few confirmed cases and deaths, companies in the country with the capacity to secure or produce masks sought to send aid internationally. OpUSA's partners at the U.S. Embassy in Hanoi recognized an opportunity for Vietnam to support the American people by partnering with OpUSA, and helped facilitate the effort to deliver millions of masks from Vietnam—bringing our relationship with the country full circle, forty years later.

As American cities—Los Angeles in particular—have struggled to contain the spread of COVID-19 and mitigate its impact, the generous donation of masks from Vietnam has been an important component of OpUSA's COVID-19 response efforts. To date, masks have been distributed to more than thirty-six community partners in Los Angeles, New York and elsewhere in the U.S., helping to protect our country's most vulnerable.

We are so proud of our continued friendship with Vietnam, and the collaborative spirit through which this major relief effort came to fruition. As we forge ahead into 2021, we are reminded of our earliest days, when hopes were high and the shared goal of creating a better world for all people brought together many players across the public and private sectors. We are determined to reignite that passion with all our partners in the year ahead!

