

# LOVE PREVAILS

## THE THAELERS ENDURED AN AGONIZING TWO-YEAR SEPARATION, CELEBRATING THEIR 50TH WEDDING ANNIVERSARY IN 2025

**L**eigh “Skip” Thaeler ’70 thought he’d lost his soulmate. Thaeler was leaving Vietnam in late March 1973 after a six-month deployment at the Vietnamese Navy headquarters along Ben Bach Dang in Saigon. Thaeler’s original assignment was to join a riverine unit to conduct counterintelligence. However, upon his arrival in-country, he was reassigned as a communications security officer and a communications advisor to the Vietnamese.

His experience as a self-described “Saigon Cowboy,” was less “Apocalypse Now” and more “Good Morning, Vietnam,” Thaeler said. However, he had a life-altering experience during his brief tenure in Vietnam.

He was introduced to Kim, nicknamed Lien, by a friend. The duo didn’t have instant chemistry during their first date in Saigon. Thaeler expected Kim to speak Vietnamese with him and to be wearing her nation’s traditional ao dai dress. She arrived in Western blue jeans and spoke only English. They then proceeded to argue about one thing or other until after the midnight curfew.

“A somewhat combative first date,” Thaeler said.

While it was an inauspicious start, it was the beginning of a lifelong romance. On Halloween 1975, they married. This year, they celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary.

This love story nearly evaporated during the final two years of the Vietnam War. However, through a series of serendipitous events and unquenchable hope, Kim, her daughter, Linda, and Skip were reunited in the spring of 1975. Their unbreakable bond survived despite losing touch while Thaeler was stationed

**Then-LT Leigh “Skip” Thaeler ’70, USN, left Vietnam 59 days after the Paris Peace Accords were signed in January 1973. It would take two years before he was reunited with his fiancé and her daughter.**



**Kim and Leigh “Skip” Thaeler ’70 visited Croatia in 2023. In 2025, they celebrated 50 years of marriage.**

PHOTOS COURTESY OF LEIGH “SKIP” THAELE ’70

in Spain in 1973-75 and months of letters were returned as undeliverable. It weathered heartbreak and the sporadic drip of ominous news coming out of Vietnam around the fall of Saigon in April 1975.

Along the way, this couple of destiny experienced moments of optimism. They were assisted by good Samaritans, including an exhausted postal worker who bent regulations, which ultimately led to their reunification.

### HEARTBREAK

With President Richard Nixon’s election in 1968, U.S. military force involvement in Vietnam began winding down. In April 1970, Nixon announced the withdrawal of 150,000 troops by the spring of 1971. In January 1972, Nixon announced troop strength would be cut to 69,000, down from nearly 500,000 in 1967.

The final American infantry battalions were withdrawn from Vietnam in August 1972. The Paris Peace Accords, signed on 27 January 1973, essentially ended the United States’ direct military actions in Vietnam and authorized the release of American prisoners of war. The accords included an agreement that all U.S. forces would be withdrawn from Vietnam within 60 days.

Thaeler departed Vietnam on 27 March 1973, 59 days after the peace accords were signed. While the U.S. ended direct military intervention, fighting was only momentarily halted. The North Vietnamese began enlarging their territory. By 30 April 1975, they had total control of Vietnam.

Thaeler and Kim were together about six months before he was assigned to a three-year deployment in Rota, Spain. During that time, Thaeler unsuccessfully attempted to get a special visa for Kim to leave with him. They promised each other they’d stay in touch.

Kim initially thought there might be a chance that her company would send her to Hawaii. That didn’t pan out. After Thaeler’s transfer from Southeast Asia, they wrote letters, lots of letters.

After a few successful exchanges, the correspondence stopped; and neither one received any further word. They lost track of each other. Kim moved. Spain and Vietnam were not on good terms, which complicated international mail delivery.

They were out of touch for nearly two years. Thaeler sent letters every few weeks desperately seeking an answer.

Then a Spanish mail courier arrived at Thaeler's house in Fuentebavia in February 1975 with a dozen of his letters wrapped together and labeled: addressee unknown. They reached Vietnam but stalled in the mail system and were then returned to sender in bulk.

"It wasn't that she was ignoring me. She hadn't heard from me in a year and a half," Thaeler said.

On 5 April 1975, a note Kim passed to a friend of hers as she was leaving Vietnam, reached the tormented recipient. Kim said all the letters she wrote Thaeler were returned, undelivered.

She wrote, "I thought we had something special. I wish you the best." Thaeler then sent a flurry of letters and telegrams trying to reconnect with Kim, all to no avail.

Near the end of April 1975, about the time the North Vietnamese Army reached Saigon, Thaeler learned 300 civilians were killed in Buon Ma Thuot, the city where Kim was born.

"I thought maybe she might have tried to go back there," Thaeler said. "There were all kinds of horror stories."

Kim and her daughter were aided by a Vietnamese Army major who recognized things were going bad in the final days of April 1975. He got them out past the gate guards at Tan Son Nhut Air Base, where Kim saw an American Air Force serviceman with a clipboard.

Kim asked him if she was on the manifest.

He said, "Are you kidding? There's no such thing as a manifest. There's a bus over there leading to the runway. If you want to get on, get on."

The Vietnamese major had two kids and asked her to take them with her, because she spoke English. Kim, her daughter, Linda, and the two surprise guests hopped on the bus, and then a USAF C-141 ... and the next thing they knew they were in Guam.

Less than 24 hours later, Tan Son Nhut was under the control of the North Vietnamese; and the U.S. Embassy in Saigon soon followed.

For two weeks after Saigon had fallen, Thaeler drafted letters to a couple of embassies that were part of the international peacekeeping effort and attempted contact through the Red Cross and refugee organizations.

"No joy," Thaeler said. "There was a lot of that kind of heartbreak."

**Then-LT Leigh "Skip" Thaeler '70, USN, receives an award from a South Vietnamese Navy officer. Thaeler served as communications, security officer and communications officer to the Vietnamese from October 1972 until March 1973.**



**Kim, Linda and Skip Thaeler '70 at Disney World in 1975. Skip and Kim were celebrating their honeymoon before he had to return to duty in Spain to finish his deployment.**

On 14 May 1975, Thaeler was driving to work on base at Rota when he was waved down by a Navy postal worker who noticed a letter from Camp Pendleton, CA, and thought it was "important." It was from Kim.

"Getting the letter that showed she was out of Vietnam and safe was like every undeserved Christmas gift and every surprise A+ on an exam all rolled into one," Thaeler said.

## RULES WERE BROKEN

Kim and Linda stayed at Camp Pendleton for several weeks. She translated for the refugees and their American hosts. But, with 50,000 refugees coming in, her stay was limited.

In a masterful leap of faith, she went to the base's post office and asked to go through the mail. A U.S. postal worker, who was overwhelmed by so many Vietnamese names, let her search the massive piles of letters.

"I'm sure there were some postal rules that he broke," Thaeler said. "I'm glad he did."

Near the top of one pile, Kim found a letter from Thaeler's mother. His mom then worked with the Marines to get Kim and Linda to Miami, FL; and Thaeler received emergency leave to come home. Ecstatic, Thaeler was relieved but he still had six more months in his Spain assignment.

Kim and Linda stayed with Thaeler's family in Miami while he finished his tour. Thaeler received orders to the Philippines; but to go accompanied with family, the couple had to be officially married, so they wound up marrying on Navy "travel and proceed" time.

Florida had a three-day waiting period for marriage licenses; they filed on Tuesday and married on Friday, 31 October 1975. A Miami lawyer who was helping Vietnamese refugees was a justice of the peace. He hosted the wedding at his house on Halloween night.

During the ceremony, Kim was confused by the costumes, ghoulish decorations and kids coming to the house for trick or treat.

"We're getting married and there were ghoulies, ghosties and things that go bump in the night all over the walls," Thaeler said.

He recalls Kim saying, "I'm so happy; but is this the way all Americans get married?"

Thaeler just shook his head and smiled. On Halloween 2025, Kim and Skip celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary. They're both still smiling.

"Many people look at marriage and long-term relationships as a bond, as if you're somehow tied down," Thaeler said. "From the beginning and through all our challenges, I've always felt freer with Lien than I've ever felt without her." 🍷