

**Mr Hieu Van Le's acceptance address
presented at the Graduation Ceremony
Flinders University
on 12 April, 2011**

Chancellor Mr Stephen Gerlach AM
Vice-Chancellor Professor Michael Barber
Members of staff
Distinguished guests
Graduands
Ladies and gentlemen

There is one particularly striking element of this university campus. It is the view. In particular, it is the glorious strip of blue along the western horizon.

There is a famous poem, by John Masefield, which begins:

*I must go down to the sea again, to the lonely sea and the sky,
And all I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by,
And the wheel's kick and the wind's song
And the white sail's shaking,
And a grey mist on the sea's face, and a grey dawn breaking.*

It is a very romantic view. It comes, of course, from another age – from the age of tall ships and the age of exploration.

My experience of the sea is particular and is perhaps less romantic than Masefield's. For me, the formative experience of going down to the sea was rooted in desperation and infused with fear.

Here, today, I am given cause to look out on that blue of the horizon and think of the misty dawn when our clapped-out, flimsy boat chugged into Darwin Harbour 34 years ago.

It had been my responsibility on that fragile leaky boat to navigate my newly wed wife and 40 other fellow "boat people" from Vietnam to this new land.

My personal navigation to Australia had been a combination of dark circumstance, accident, fear, despair, but – most of all – of hope.

I was born in the year the Vietnamese people defeated French colonial rule in Vietnam. Ironically, that was also the year that marked the beginning of the bloodiest conflict in our history – the conflict between the North and the South, otherwise known as the Vietnam War.

For me, the war was part of my life and a painful memory of my childhood. I lost many close relatives and friends in the war. I learned that life was fragile, delicate and precious.

At the age of 21, circumstances caused me to set sail in search of a safe place to live and the opportunity to rebuild my future. I decided to escape from my motherland.

I can now be full of gratitude that when I was young the question of "to be or not to be?" was thrust upon me – where difficulty of circumstance made it simple to decide to "be", to

throw what seemed like so much away, to cast off the mooring rope, grasp the tiller and sail – to chance my “being” on the seas of fate, literally and metaphorically.

As a refugee, the conception of “journey” is, for me, significant – embracing as it does notions of voyaging to discovery, of finding the challenges of impediments, of rites of passage, of pilgrimage.

There is an odd line in our national anthem – “*Our land is girt by sea...*” – as if we need to inform ourselves and the world that our country is surrounded by water. It is a rather prosaic observation.

But then, perhaps, we should make this observation because it reminds us that we are the most defined nation state on earth.

We are the only country to occupy an entire continent – a unique continent, long separated from the other land masses, with its own fauna and flora, a land so ancient and unchanged it has been called the “timeless land”.

Ours is a land so separate, so distinguishable.

But what is most significant is that this is a place of coming together, where threads of lives have come over the seas to stitch together here. The ocean – the blue strip on the horizon – is our connection to the world!

The man who first placed on this continent the name “Australia” – indeed, the man who drew the first complete map of this continent – was Matthew Flinders.

It is right that Flinders should be so honoured here.

That this university carries his name invests this place with a tradition, an ideal of venturing, a sense of discovery.

That his name be given to an institution of learning is fitting. Any learning is a journey into the unknown, a stepping-stone towards understanding, a meeting with the revelation of the new.

We are all pilgrims on the sea of fate. We can choose to sit in the snug complacency of our harbour, or we can set sail to seek the horizon of the unknown. We can seek the knowledge of passage.

Learning, and expanding our horizons, makes us humble pilgrims! Learning is our pilgrimage to the unknown, our step across the edge of certainty, our encounter with the new.

There is a most wonderful story associated with Flinders, from 1802. Miriam Estensen puts it thus in her biography of Flinders:

“... At four o'clock in the afternoon the man aloft called down that he had sighted a white, pyramid-shaped rock ahead. Shortly – and startlingly – it took shape as a ship. Every glass on board was focused upon it. Every man watching, as it came towards them, the first sail they had seen in five months as she continued to approach,he gave the order to beat to quarters and clear the ship for action. Investigators pennant and Union Jack were hoisted, and aboard the strange

vessel French ensigns fluttered up at the main and fore mastheads, followed by an English Jack forward.

Flinders raised a white flag of truce... Flinders brought his ship again into the wind and, as the French ship hove to as well, had a boat lowered... (and was) rowed across and boarded Le Geographe."

It is an amazing story – these two ships, of nations officially at war with each other at the time, meeting on this uncharted coast, on this distant shore.

There is another element to this, for as they compared charts in Captain Baudin's cabin on the *Le Geographe*, they were actually stitching together the last pieces of the map of the world, the last significant piece of coastline as yet unmapped.

Flinders, of course, named the place Encounter Bay – a place of meeting, of coming together.

Flinders's passage to achieving his complete map of Australia was not free of adversity, of setbacks, of frustrations.

On his return voyage, his leaking boat forced him to call into the French port on Mauritius, where he was promptly detained. From this island of detention, he wrote to his wife in 1804:

"I might relate to thee, my best beloved, the anxious fears, unhappiness, indignities and disappointments I have undergone in this island: but it would only be distressing to thee and myself. I look forward now, every week, for some intelligence from France or England that shall set me and my unhappy comrades at liberty, but should none such arrive before the middle of March next year, I shall begin to be hopeless."

As it happened, Flinders was so detained until 1810.

Baudin, on the other hand, sailed in to Sydney, where, Estensen writes, the Governor, Philip Gidley King's "... *treatment of the foreign guests was extremely generous... The colonists at every level welcomed the social novelty of their French visitors.*"

When we learn to plug the leaks in our insecurities, to navigate away from prejudice and take pride in ourselves, we learn the wisdom inherent in a generosity of spirit.

We learn – and learning comes to us – in many ways. We learn by the pressing of circumstance – like I learned navigation on a flimsy boat searching for a place of peace and freedom.

We learn through the learning of others, as one does at this university. We learn from our experience. We learn by coming together.

In her speech at the Harvard University Graduation, JK Rowling – the author of *Harry Potter* books – spoke not of her great success, but of what adversity and setbacks had taught her. She said:

"...The knowledge that you have emerged wiser and stronger from setbacks means that you are, ever after, secure in your ability to survive. You will never truly know yourself, or the strength of your relationships, until both have been tested by adversity. Such knowledge is a true gift..."

When we arrived in Darwin on that leaky boat, we were, like Baudin, greeted with a generosity of spirit. That generosity, to paraphrase the university's motto, inspired us to achieve. Our gratitude inspired us to want to give back.

We came with our pieces, our threads of culture, and we were stitched back together again, stitched into the rich fabric of this country such that we became part of it and it became us.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

When you leave this building today, I ask you to glance at that band of blue on the horizon, from whence Flinders first saw this place, where now is this institution of learning bearing his name.

Reflect on the encounter with knowledge to which this place is dedicated. Let this be a place where knowledge and wisdom come together, and as is written in the Book of Proverbs:

"Wisdom is the principal thing, therefore get wisdom; and with all they getting, get understanding."

Chancellor, Ladies and gentlemen,

It is with the humility learned from our generosity of spirit that I accept this honour today. It is an honour which inspires me to achieve and, I hope, inspires others.

Thank you.