

Escape From Highlands

Viet Refugees' Ordeal

By Bernard Weinraub
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Saigon

Her face is swollen with grief. She stands beside a half-open door on Trm Minh The, near the Saigon docks, clutching her infant son and staring vacantly at the scooters and buses that speed past.

Ly Thi Van lost three children in the recent surge by North Vietnamese troops

across the Central Highlands.

She barely speaks now and seems in shock. "Whenever we ask her a question she starts to cry," says her sister, Ly Thi Tinh, also a refugee from the Central Highlands town of Ban Me Thuot.

The two sisters are widows. Ly Thi Van's husband, 34-year-old army master sergeant, died last year on a patrol in the highlands.

Ly Thi Tinh, also an enlisted man, was killed in the highlands in 1966. The 33-year-old woman has a 10-year-old son.

The two women, carrying bundles of clothes, pots and photographs, came to Saigon the other morning to stay briefly with an uncle.

Both women had lived for years in Ban Me Thuot, a pleasant highlands town of Vietnamese and Chinese shopkeepers, farmers, Mon-

tagnard tribesmen, Italian and French coffee planters and American missionaries. They lived beside one another in thatched-roof homes near the sector command post, working as rice vendors and collecting widows' pensions of about \$80 every three months.

Last week the North Vietnamese began a fierce rocket and tank attack on the sleepy town, an attack that was part of the Communist advance across the highlands.

"We didn't know what to do," said Ly Thi Tinh. "We picked up everything in bags and ran to the neighbor's home. All of us didn't know what to do. Everyone was crying. What to do? What to do?"

"We ran to the airstrip where there were helicopters," said Ly Thi Tinh, "We ran. We closed our eyes. We did not want to open our eyes. Everywhere there were bodies. There were shells flying all over. I knew I would die."

At a crossroads leading to the airstrip the fighting was so intense that the women and their children had to turn back.

In the confusion and panic, the two sisters and their family split up. Ly Thi Van and her five children — ranging in age from 13 months old to 15 years — began running out of Ban Me Thuot with hundred of others, dashing east along a road crammed with refugees.

About three miles east of Ban Me Thuot, the family boarded a packed bus bound for Phuoc An, 30 miles east, on Route 21. Somewhere along the route the bus was halted at a road block set up by the Viet Cong.

Ly Thi Van, speaking in a murmur, said: "We saw other buses stop, too. There were three VC on the road and many VC hidden in the jungle. All of a sudden we heard airplanes overhead. One VC in the jungle yelled 'Open fire.' Another VC on the road, near the buses, said no, don't fire, everyone's a civilian.

"There was a mistake, I don't know what happened,"

said the 36-year-old woman. "There were explosions all around, the bus exploded. People began firing at us," her voice trailed off.

She saw the charred body of her 6-year-old son beside the bus. Clutching her infant, Ly Thi Van saw her groaning 9-year-old son on the ground. The woman picked up the body and began running.

"All the way he was crying," she said. "All the way he said that his chest

was burning. Oh, my God. What could I do? His chest was burning. Then he stopped crying. I looked at him. His lip was getting darker and darker and darker. And he died."

A third child, a teenage boy, also on the bus, is missing and presumed dead. The woman buried the 9-year-old with the help of Montagnard tribesmen who fed her and the infant and took them to Phuoc An. There the sisters were reunited — Ly Thi

Tinh, her child and a wounded uncle spent about three days walking the 30 miles from Ban Me Thuot to Phuoc An.

"It was a miracle," says Ly Thi Tinh. "We stayed at the air field in Phuoc An and we met a helicopter pilot, a friend of my husband's from Ban Me Thuot. He took us to Nha Trang by helicopter."

From Nha Trang, a city on the South China Sea 200 miles northeast of Saigon, the women and their chil-

dren flew to Saigon.

"We asked for money, we begged for money and people helped us," said Ly Thi Tinh. "You sometimes meet good people."

The women are now bereft. They lost their savings, their jewelry, their documents enabling them to collect war widow pensions.

"Everything went up in smoke, everything," said Ly Thi Tinh. Her sister, gripping the infant, trembled and began to weep.