

By Joan King
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SAIPAN, April 28—While tens of thousands of Vietnamese fleeing Saigon are being put in tent cities and military barracks on Guam and in the Philippines, 56 refugees who stole a South Vietnamese air force plane April 3 are relaxing in a new, 200-room luxury resort hotel on a tropical lagoon in Saipan.

The Continental Hotel, complete with a restaurant, swimming pool and slot machines, located on a 48-square-mile tropical island, is housing the 28 men, 18 women and 10 children.

Saipan, in the Mariana Islands, 150 miles from Guam, is administered by the United States as a United Nations trusteeship territory and will vote in June on whether to become a commonwealth of the United States.

The refugees, who commandeered a South Vietnamese air force C-130 Hercules transport plane April 3, "have never had a day when we've gone hungry," said Capt. Pham Quan Tam, 35, spokesman for the group.

Paul Poer, manager of the posh Continental Hotel, where the 56 refugees are passing their time, has provided 18 rooms for them on the second floor. He said he was "more interested in their having a place to stay" than worried about their not paying their bills. But he said the hotel "expected to be reimbursed," and was "dealing through the trust territory government, who is in contact with the U. S. government."

Citing "religious and political" reasons for leaving, Tam and his sister, Tran Thuong Nhon, acting principal of the International School in Saigon, said the "hero" who got the refugees out of Saigon was Major Canh, pilot of the plane.

Although Canh had been planning the escape for about a month, the friends and relatives were notified only two hours before the plane was to pick them up at Longthanh for the 2½-hour trip to Singapore.

The plane was scheduled by the Vietnamese air force to go to Phanrang to pick up evacuees. Instead, Canh flew it to Longthanh, where the others arrived by cars from Saigon just in time to board, according to Canh.

Canh had to leave his family behind in Dalat.

Their escape almost failed when a Vietnamese special forces jeep arrived and a gun was pointed at Canh, before the plane took off. Why the gun was not fired Canh doesn't know. It was suggested that a bag of rice that was put off the plane might have been the reason.

The plane flew for an hour at an altitude of 300 feet to avoid being detected by radar.

In Singapore they spent 21 days in a detention center before they were put on a Pan American flight to Guam that later took them to Saipan.

It is not clear why the refugees were sent to Saipan. The refugees say the Inter-government Committee on European Migration arranged their flight to Saipan.

Dan Akimoto, U. S. consul on Saipan, is awaiting word from Washington as to where the refugees will go next.

The refugees said they have asked Canada, West Germany and Australia for asylum. Since they have no relatives in the United States they indicated they were not sure they would be accepted there.

For now, they have no idea when they will be leaving Saipan, or for where.

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56 on Saipan Are Housed in Luxury Hotel