

Florida Braces for Influx

By Karen DeYoung

Special to The Washington Post

EGLIN AIR FORCE BASE, Fla., May 1—A few years ago, Eglin Air Force Base was one of the main training sites for fighter-bomber pilots of the Vietnamese air force.

People in the small Florida communities surrounding the base 50 miles east of Pensacola, communities like Niceville, Valparaiso and Fort Walton Beach, grew used to seeing Oriental faces on their streets, and many Vietnamese-American friendships were formed.

Like much of the rural South, the people of the Florida panhandle supported the South Vietnamese, and America's involvement in their war.

Now that the war is over, though, the red carpet for Vietnamese refugees is a little slow unrolling. At least 1,000 are expected to arrive at Eglin Friday or Saturday, the vanguard of an estimated 2,500 planned for temporary housing here pending their distribution throughout the country.

Although considerably less than the 20,000 refugees originally slated for the 724-square-mile Florida air base, the prospect of any Vietnamese at all has made some of the local citizenry, according to Niceville city manager Lannie Corbin, "apprehensive." There are, said Corbin, "a lot of unanswered questions."

A community of 6,700, Niceville is just outside the gates of Eglin in Okaloosa County. Forty per cent of its population is employed by the Air Force and many residents are retired military people. Nearly everyone else is employed by one of the town's two industrial concerns: a lingerie factory and a fish-processing plant, both of which have laid off workers recently.

Although the Air Force has assured them the Vietnamese are only temporary guests who will be confined to Eglin before their dispersal throughout the country, residents of Niceville and nearby Valparaiso are worried that some might decide they like it here. Some local businesses are denouncing the selection of Eglin as a refugee reception site.

"There is no way under the sun we can accommodate these people here," Corbin said. "There's nothing for them to do."

"Everybody is thinking, 'Why are they coming here?'" remarked Bob Whitfield, a lifelong resident.

Berkley Scott, editor of the twice-weekly Bayou Times, serving Niceville and Valparaiso, says the protests are a misunderstanding based on lack of information.

"There won't be any problems," Scott said, "once they realize these people aren't going to be a bunch of Montagnard wildmen roaming the streets." Scott said he would run an editorial supporting any aid the community is able to give, and reminding the people of Niceville of their close ties with and virtual dependence on the Air Force.

Some disgruntled Florida-

ans have expressed concern to their state legislators. Sen. Pat Thomas, a Democrat whose district borders Eglin, recalls that this is not the first time Florida has been asked to receive refugees. In the years following the Castro takeover several hundred thousand Cubans escaped to Florida, primarily to the Miami area, "and most of them decided to stay here," Thomas said.

Northwest Florida, Thomas said, "is the most economically depressed area of the state — and people are concerned about their jobs and their schools. I'm sure the federal government will provide impact funds on a temporary basis, but there

comes a time when those funds are withdrawn, as we found out with the Cubans."

Although most state legislators agree with Florida Senate president Dempsey Barron, (D-Panama City) that the refugee processing and housing will be exclusively a federal program, placing no undue burden on the state, there is some confusion and a plea for concrete assurance that Florida will not ultimately be called upon to contribute to the care, feeding and placement of the refugees.

Rep. Alan Becker, (D-Miami) questioned what will happen after the program to process the refugees runs out. "We ought to know defi-

nitely—what they plan after that."

Gov. Reubin Askew has issued a statement asking for patience and tolerance. "It is a human gesture . . . and we will certainly work with the federal authorities to assume our share of responsibility in this effort."

On Wednesday, C-130 transport aircraft made five trips to deliver a portable hospital. Working around the clock in 12-hour shifts, Eglin civil engineers are building wooden frames for 170 12-person tents to house the Vietnamese. Tents will be placed in modules, with each module area provided with a latrine and shower tent.