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Priest Describes Suffering Of Vietcong's Prisoners

By Susan Guffey

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AGANA, Guam — Three months after escaping from the Vietcong, the Rev. Joseph Nguyen Quoi Hai is on his way to New York City.

He also is vehement in his condemnation of the forces that are assuming leadership of his small country and full of firsthand experiences with the Communists of both North and South Vietnam.

The reasons often given for the massive airlift to Guam and other U.S. points is that the people of Vietnam are afraid for their lives. The Communists, they say, will not spare these people when they take over Saigon.

There are those who question that reasoning, however, saying that the North would not risk the international uproar that would result.

But Father Joseph says that it is so.

"These people are cruel even when they don't need to be," he said in an interview here yesterday.

At age 11, Father Joseph fled the North with his mother. From his birth until 1954, he lived in the same province as Ho Chi Minh's native town.

Late last December, he and many of his parishioners became captives of the Communists in the jungles and forests near the village of Tanhlinh.

His escape, he explained, was planned after he learned he was slated for execution by a firing squad the next morning.

During his captivity, he said yesterday, he witnessed more than 100 executions, was told of rapes of 15- and 16-year-old girls and saw women given no time to rest after they gave birth on the march to the camp.

The women asked for time, he said, but their request was denied. The guards, he added, said nothing was more important than "the cause."

Many of the women and their newborn children died, he said adding, "there was so much blood. They could not stop, they could not wash."

Describing his own escape was one of the few times Father Joseph smiled during the interview, which lasted more than an hour.

When his montagnard informants told him of his death sentence, he said he prepared the camp's makeshift altar, as always, for mass.

"The candles were there, the book was open," he said. "It was just like we were about to start."

Then, Father Joseph excused himself to wash in a nearby river, and never returned.

He left a letter to the Communists, he said, to be given to them after a few hours had passed.

In it, he expressed his regrets at not being able to stay and said he would return "in about a week."

"I didn't," he added with a deadpan face.

He and his party of five were safe in Saigon within the week.

Then there was a three week recuperation period while he regained the strength lost during his captivity.

When that was over, his bishop gave him permission to study in the United States. Father Joseph has plans for a doctorate in sociology from a New York university.

But as he observed here: "There's little chance I'll ever be able to go back" to Vietnam.

"A former prisoner of war will probably not be welcome under any new regime," he said.

While he waits for his flight to the United States, Father Joseph says mass daily for the evacuees here. The people in the corrugated metal buildings on Andersen Air Force Base and throughout the rest of the island's evacuee camps "are not refugees," he says.

"Those people are still there. Those people are rich. Those who are still there and poor are waiting for the American ships to come and take them out."

But for now, there is little to do except minister to the ones who have left, whether they are rich or poor.

Father Joseph's current services are worlds away from the one he and his parishioners held the day after their capture.

"On Christmas night, I was among the Communists and my people in the middle of the forest," he recalled here yesterday. There without any robes or the other things that normally accompany a mass, Father Joseph and his faithful held "a very brief services in our hearts."