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Refugees Arrive at Eglin Base

By Karen De Young

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EGLIN AIR FORCE BASE, Fla., May 4—Two weeks ago, Nguyen Van Minh was a very important man. With law degrees from Hanoi and Paris, he served 10 years as judge advocate for the Saigon military. For 16 years he worked for one of the largest banks in Vietnam, and eventually rose to deputy manager.

Just two weeks ago, Minh, 52, owned a modern apartment on a Saigon boulevard. His wife, children and grandchildren were happy, healthy and prosperous.

Today, he sleeps on a cot in a canvas tent where he lives with 11 other people. Of his job, all he has left is a bank brochure with his name printed in capital letters, and a billfold full of business cards. He carries all of his family's belongings in one suitcase and a plastic bag.

When he speaks, the corners of his mouth tremble, and his voice rarely rises above a whisper. After leaving Vietnam with only two hours' notice he is grateful to be alive and with his family, but he hasn't the slightest idea what will become of them. He has no money, no hope of employment, no offer of a home.

Minh, his wife, daughter, son-in-law and granddaughter were among the 373 refugees who arrived here on a chartered Northwest Orient 747 jet at dawn today after a 21-hour flight from Guam.

The first of several thousand Vietnamese scheduled to enter the United States and begin processing and placement at Eglin through the next several weeks, the tired refugees straggled down the ramp to waiting

Air Force buses. Beside the landing strip, the high school band of Niceville, Fla., played "God Bless America."

The band, and the presence here of the mayors of Niceville and other nearby communities were an indication that, officially at least, the refugees were welcome in northwest Florida.

A few days ago, the welcome did not promise to be warm. As petitions circulated denouncing selection of Eglin as one of three U.S. refugee reception sites, residents worried publicly about everything from tropical diseases and mixed mar-

riages to losing their jobs to the newcomers. There was talk of picketing and barring windows.

But if the local citizens didn't turn out to wave as busses passed through towns on the 10-mile journey from the airfield to the refugee compound, neither did they show up to protest.

Like Minh, many of the refugees arrived penniless, able only to find a way out of Vietnam through friends and relatives with connections. Several, however, carried bags of gold from the plane.

The refugees' reaction to their new home at Eglin was varied. Many thanked every American in sight, while others seemed stunned and sat on their cots with dazed eyes. Younger couples dumped their belongings in a tent and hurried out to inspect the compound. Children went on running sprees, full of pent-up energy from the long flight, and game and coloring book groups formed. Many of the refugees rushed to a telephone tent to call (collect) waiting friends and relatives throughout the United States.

Even though the makeshift compound would be only a brief stop for many, some of the refugees took one look at the military-style camp, its portable chemical toilets and the tuna salad sandwiches on the mess menu and sat down in disgust. They, didn't, said one disgruntled businessman, come to America to live like monkeys in a forest.

Volunteers assigned to handle refugee processing through the Immigration and Naturalization Service and the Social Security Administration were given a one-hour briefing Saturday evening, but this morning, many of the refugees were on their own in determining where to go from Eglin and how to do it.

More than 600 refugees are scheduled to arrive at Eglin Monday. When they enter the tent compound they will be given a letter of greeting and instructions written in Vietnamese.