

A Grieving Refugee Says Her American Husband

By JAMES T. WOOTEN

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ELGIN AIR FORCE BASE, Fla., May 5 — The pretty, young women slumped on the edge of her cot in the Vietnamese refugee compound here today, twisting the tiny gold band on the fourth finger of her left hand.

"Something happen," she softly sighed as a spring shower pattered on the roof of her tent. "I not know what happen, but something happen, I think."

She was quite right.

Although it is not yet precisely clear what has happened to the 24-year-old Trinh Hong Mai, she has apparently been rejected by her American husband and his family. And while many of the 343 other Vietnamese brought here yesterday were busily, happily and noisily involved with plans for resettlement, she sat alone in her tent, trying to explain what she does not yet understand.

According to Air Force officials, State Department officials, documents she brought with her on her 12,000-mile journey, and her own narrative, Miss Mai is also Mrs. Robert J. Bray, and it was on the strength of a certificate of her marriage to the civil engineer from Danville, Va., that American Embassy officials cleared her for evacuation.

Told She Was Unwelcome

When she stepped from the giant airliner that brought her here from Guam yesterday morning, however, she dialed her husband's telephone number and was told by her mother-in-law, she said, that he was not there, that he did not wish to see her again and that she was most definitely not welcome.

Her husband's mother, Alease Paulokovich, was unavailable for comment, but the mother's 21-year-old son, Michael, Mr. Bray's half-brother, said he had not seen him in five or six months.

Mr. Paulokovich confirmed that his mother had spoken with the young refugee woman yesterday and that she had been told she was not

welcome in Danville.

"We sure can't afford her here," he said in a telephone interview.

Then, in a brief conversation, he said Mr. Bray was 33 years old, that his parents were divorced in 1950, that he was unmarried when he went to Vietnam to work for a construction company, that he had not married again since his return in November, 1973, and that he was not "probably unemployed."

Then, an unidentified man took the phone and angrily ended the conversation.

"That's all you're going to get!" he said.

No Identity

"Who is this?" he was asked.

"Well, it ain't Robert Bray," the man said, hanging up.

Miss Mai, or Mrs. Bray, said today that she met her husband in 1971 at Canh Tho, the site of a military airstrip a hundred miles north-east of Saigon, while she was an employe of the United States Army and he was a site supervisor for a civilian construction company.

"He is so nice to me," she remembered today. "He treat me so good. I love him. He is so—so nice to me."

"We live together. We very happy. Bob say to me he is happy. He say maybe get married. I am so happy."

Such premarital living arrangements are not uncommon in Vietnam and thus Miss Mai went happily to her parents, she said, and asked their blessing on her marriage to Mr. Bray. She insisted, at the same time, that he also write and ask his mother for a similar endorsement.

"The letter come back and say it fine for Bob to marry me," she continued. "Oh, I so happy and Bob, he so happy, too."

They were married, according to her certificate, on July 15, 1972.

"I take good care of Bob,"

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Rejects Her

she said. "I always home working. I washing clothes. I sweeping floors. I cooking. I love Bob very much. I so happy be his wife."

"But when he stop in bar and stay long time and not come home I say he should not stay in bar so much and not come home where I take good care of him."

"He very mad. He say, 'Not tell me what to do!' But it not right to have husband who not come home. I say, 'Bob, it not right.' Then he leave. I not see him again."

"I am so sorry. I worry so much. I go to Saigon. Try to find Bob. But I worry so

much I not see motorcycle—uh, Honda, you know—and I am run over with leg hurt very much. I think Bob will come see me in hospital but he not come."

"When I am well I go to headquarters for his company in Saigon. His friends say he not there but I know Bob there. His friends say not there but I know. I know."

Since November 1973, she said, she had written 20 letters to her husband, asking that she be allowed to join him in the United States.

6 Letters, Then None

"He write me six letters. He say no. Mai must wait while. Then maybe come,"

she said. Then the letters ceased a year ago.

"But then VC comes," she went on. "My parents say I be together with husband. If I stay, VC kill me. They find out I work for Army. They find out I marry American. They kill me. They kill all my family. My parents say I leave Vietnam. I be together with husband.

"They take me to airport. To Tan Son Nhut. They hurt so much when I leaving. First time I ever see father cry."

After her call to her husband's mother's house yesterday, she became hysterical.

"Give me something to kill myself," she screamed. "I lost my country. I have killed my parents. I have lost my husband."

After she was sedated and after a night's rest, she regained her composure by this morning when offers of sponsorship began arriving here. Most were from young, single men, an Air Force officer said.

But, she said no to all of them and as the rain steadily fell outside her tent, she could not seem to stop twisting and turning and touching the wedding band Mr. Bray gave her three years ago.



The Miami Herald

A picture that Trinh Hong Mai, now in refugee quarters at Eglin Air Force Base, in Florida, says shows her and Robert J. Bray at the time of their marriage.