

Even in a Refugee Camp, a General Is Still a General

By JON NORDHEIMER

Special to The New York Times

CAMP PENDLETON, Calif., May 11—The man is short and round, and refugee camp life has not visibly affected his rosy-cheeked vigor.

With his hair well-groomed and clothes immaculately pressed, he resembles any one of hundreds of Vietnamese businessmen living in the tents of Camp 8, the refugee quarters choking a dale on the southern edge of the encampment that now holds 18,600 displaced persons from Southeast Asia. His eyes, however, are cold and hard. Men walking past him on the dirt paths of the camp turn their heads to escape his gaze.

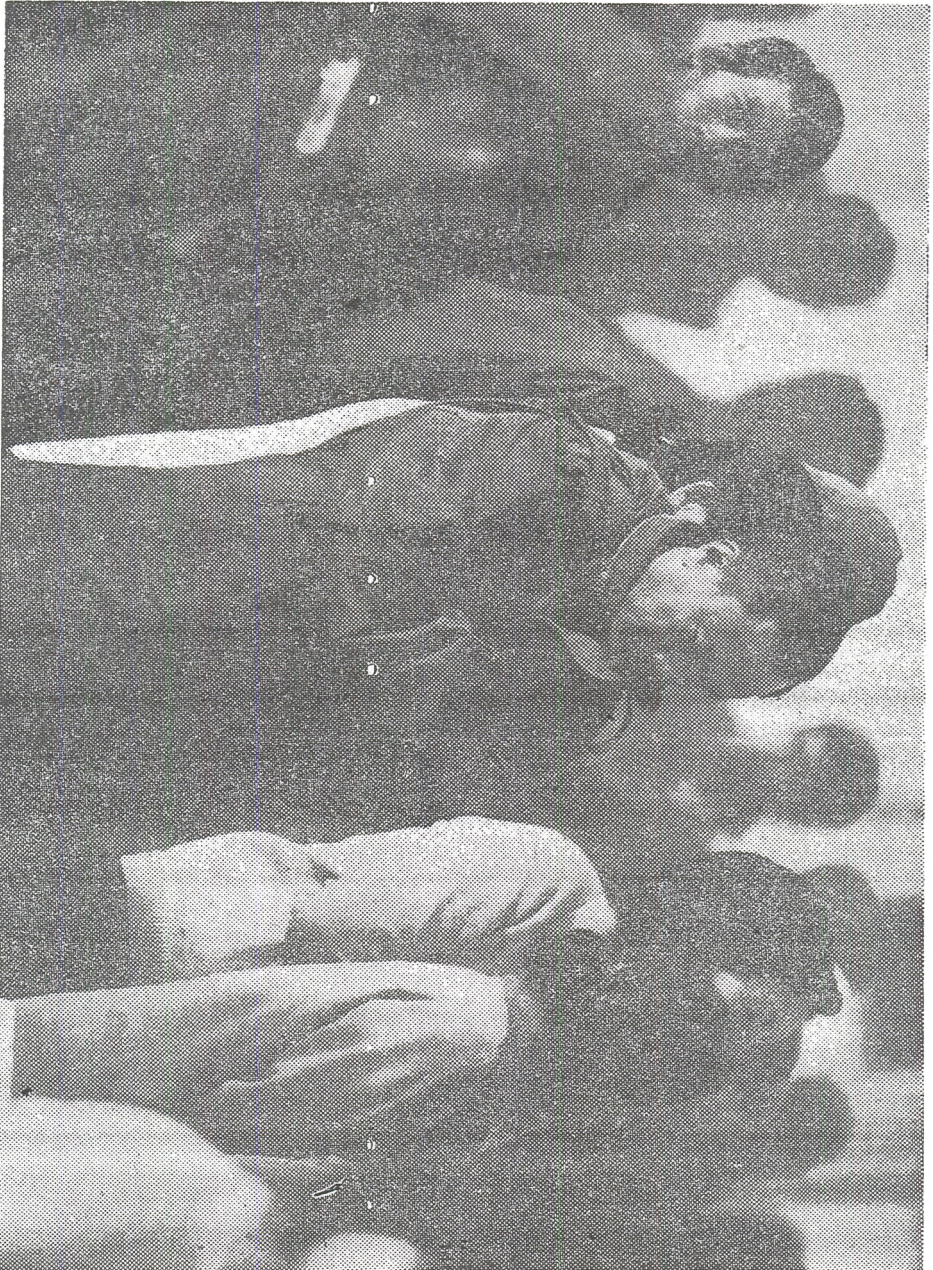
His name is Trang Si Tan. For years, he was one of the most feared men in South Vietnam—Brigadier General Tan, the hated police chief of Saigon.

He takes his meals in his tent in Camp 8. A woman brings it to him there, which is against the rules, but no one bothers General Tan.

He once had ambitions to marry the daughter of President Nguyen Van Thieu. But she spurned him for the director of Air Vietnam.

Many Were Tortured

No one knows exactly how many people were tortured by General Tan's men. Two



Lost in thought, a South Vietnamese refugee waits on the food line at Camp Pendleton, Calif.

The New York Times/David Strick

months ago, he was a colonel. Two weeks ago, he was a general. Now he stands on the dirt paths of Camp 8, dressed in a four-pocketed shirt and smoothly pressed slacks, and watches people pass by.

The rolling countryside around Camp 8 reminds many Vietnamese of a mountain resort called Dalat, about 200 miles north of Saigon.

Wealthy families from Saigon vacationed at Dalat, staying at the modern heated hotels and enjoying the bracing mountain air, a distinct change from the humid, choked city.

"There are no pine trees here, but in a way it is prettier," remarked a refugee as the sun dipped beneath a western ridge and the shadow line moved toward the tent city like an incoming cold tide.

Night is the enemy for the Vietnamese here. The temperature, which has gone as high as 85 degrees during the day, with heat trapped inside the olive drab field tents, may drop as much as 40 degrees at night. The refugees don every stitch of clothing available, including the Marine Corps field jacket issued everyone and burrow beneath the blankets on the cots, which number about 16 to a tent.

Still, they are too cold to sleep, and they squirm miserably in the cots or sit up and talk all night about their anxieties, or replace the blankets on the little children, who for the first time must learn the skill of sleeping under heavy covers.

Fear and Rumors

Every night there is a new rumor going around the tents. There is constant fear that the Americans will expel those who have had their documents processed, forcing them out into a hostile America.

The family of Doan Trieu Dac is luckier than most. They were assigned to a Quonset hut when they arrived here last week, and the huts are 10 to 15 degrees warmer at night. But Mr. Dac has fitful nights, too.

The family left Saigon in haste, with little money. A

chance encounter with a rich relative in the refugee city on Guam added \$100 to their purse. But Mr. Dac realizes that \$00 will not go far to support a family of eight in this country.

"Perhaps one or two or three days," he says in English, "and then we would become beggars in the streets. And then I don't think America will accept the sight of beggars, and we would be rounded by the police and we would end in jail."

Worries About Grandchildren

Mr. Dac's 71-year-old mother, who speaks no English, sat with the children on a bunk bed. Her teeth are stained brown from a lifetime of chewing betel nuts, the passion of old women of the Vietnamese countryside. She worries that the cold nights will make her grandchildren sick.

So each sundown brings the long shadows of approaching anxiety. But it is also the prettiest time of day, and the flowering mustard grass gives a golden texture to the green hills around Camp 8. It will not rain again until November or December. The spring fogs along the coast will thicken each day, and soon a high overcast will blot out the sun for days at a time. The brush-covered hills will go from green and gold to brown, and in a month or two the hills will look like smooth piles of brushed suede.

Most of the refugee families are like the Dacs, with modest means and uncertain futures. But Camp 8 is also the temporary home for some of the most powerful figures of the war. Former Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky is here, with a burly Marine M.P. posted outside the flaps of his tent to keep newsmen away.

A Feeling of Deja Vu

Brig. Gen. Nguyen Van Giau of the National Police was here, looking strangely sinister in civilian clothes and dark glasses as he lingered near the command post of Camp 8.

Indeed, there are many

Saigon, National and Special Branch policemen in this camp, giving journalists with experience of Vietnam a feeling déjà vu, that once again their movements are being as closely watched here as they were in Saigon by agents of the Thieu government.

An infrastructure of Vietnamese has been organized to help run the eight camps. The leaders were not elected.

"The Vietnamese have ways of organizing themselves," said Don Stout, head of the Red Cross operation here that is distributing clothes and supplies through the infrastructure to the refugees. "They know who their leaders are—the men who are running things just emerged and took over."

There were muted complaints that some of the "volunteers" were part of the same Saigon cartel that helped turn the Vietnamese into refugees.

Corruption Complaint

Lien Huong, a former Vietnamese correspondent of a Japanese newspaper, complained that the old corruption had infiltrated the infrastructure in the first days of life in America.

"Some people can't drop old habits," said Mr. Huong. "They are already taking a good deal of the Red Cross supplies for themselves and their friends."

The Red Cross provides kits to the refugees that have a retail value of about \$6 each, containing such items as combs, soap, toothpaste and deodorant.

Mr. Stroud denied that there had been any abuses outside of the possibility "of a little slippage here and there."

Pecking Order Remains

That did not convince some of the Vietnamese. Mr. Huong, for example, who said members of the leadership cadre were agents who took orders from Saigon "godfathers" who never left their tents. "In the Vietnamese style of corruption," another observer said, "the real boss never takes an ex-

posed post, but installs his puppet."

Old habits of social order are hard to break in Camp 8. Many refugees were still addressing each other as "Mrs. Lieutenant General" or "Mrs. Vice Chairman," and the pecking order and privileges of Saigon were difficult for some people to relinquish.

For example, the family of Mrs. Nguyen Thi Hai, the millionaire pharmacist and former Vice Chairman of the Lower House of the National Assembly, joined the end of the long chow line the other day. After an hour's wait, Mrs. Hai and her brood stepped out of the line and moved to the front, with other Vietnamese stepping aside to let them enter, although there was some protest.

Lieut. Gen. Lu Lan rubbed his eyes sleepily in the daytime heat of Tent 3-B. He wore a white T-shirt and slacks and was reluctant to discuss the debacle that had overtaken the army of the Republic of South Vietnam.

Yes, corruption had been a factor in the collapse of the army, with perhaps more than half of the army's 60-odd generals guilty of selling promotions or taking other forms of graft, but it was really all explainable. Gener-

al Lan said.

He was the former commander of II Corps, leaving that post to become chief of the Inspectorate, charged with the eradication of corruption in the Saigon army.

All Explainable

However, many Vietnamese believe that General Lan was one of the army's most corrupt generals, a reputation he said he was painfully aware of, but it was all explainable.

"Those who remained honest were considered crazy," he said. "Like they had taken leave of their senses. They had wives who said to them, 'Are you crazy, look at Mrs. Lieut. Gen.———. She has two villas and three cars and beautiful clothes, and here we have nothing but rags.' So if it was impossible to compete in an honest way, it was very easy to compete in a dishonest way."

By 1970, under American pressure, computerized records were used for the selection of generals, General Lan said. "There was a theory that you could not buy the computer," he added. "But soon ways were found to buy the people who fed information to the computer."