

Refugees' Family Life Strained by Weeks of Waiting

Special to The New York Times
MAY 27 1975
NY Times NORDHEIMER

CAMP PENDLETON, Calif., May 26—A stillness descends on Camp 1 shortly after sunset, a time for the Vietnamese refugees to draw inside the Quonset huts and canvas field tents that have sheltered many of them for nearly a month now.

The mess hall closes, and only the clatter of pots and pans from inside the kitchen is heard, broken at times by the hydraulic groan of garbage trucks forklifting away the day's refuse.

On the bottom mattress of a bunk bed in Quonset hut 64365 sits Doan Trieu Dac, and opposite him sits his wife, Le Thi, a woman of

This is the first of several articles that will follow selected Vietnamese refugees through various stages of adjustment to life in the United States.

winsome beauty whose age (35) and children (six) have failed to introduce a line of fatigue in her face.

Four weeks of camp life, following four weeks of arranging the family's escape from Saigon, have produced a strain on the couple, and it is more clearly evident in Mr. Dac's thin face.

Volley ball and pickup soccer games in the open fields on the periphery of Camp 1 finally surrender to the darkness, and many of the young players drift to an asphalt-covered lot where the Marines show outdoor



The New York Times/David Strick
Doan Trieu Dac with his wife, Le Thi, beside him, their six children and his mother, Nguyen Thuyet Ngan, right, assembled for a picture in the Quonset hut they occupy in Camp Pendleton, Calif. All have unpaid jobs there.

movies on the screen that is held 15 feet off the ground between two telephone poles.

The films shown every night are a grainy product from Hollywood's back-lot days, vintage cowboy and action movies that have even been retired from television late shows around the nation.

But the audience seated around the screen in a half-circle, and huddled in the green field jackets issued every refugee by the Marines, appears to enjoy this vision of America, and it is about the only contact they have had with the world that awaits them outside the

gates of this processing center.

Mr. Dac, smoking a cigarette, sits about 50 yards from the rise and fall of the movie's English-language sound track.

The children are either at the movies or have left the hut to visit with friends elsewhere in the village. Mr. Dac's 59-year-old mother rests in another bed, and soon she will drop off to sleep, a slumber that is now less troubled and fitful than her first night here when she awoke to fears about

Continued on Page 11, Column 2

where she was.

Time in the camp has also eased the tone of the nightly conversations between Mr. Dac and his wife. In the beginning there were many disputes. At first, Mr. Dac would scold his children for leaving the hut to play, fearing they would become lost in the strange camp, or he would chastise them for failing to get an early start in the long meal lines.

Mrs. Dac would cry and complain that her husband did not care for the children or love her enough. She would break down and for the first time in their marriage she spoke harsh words against her husband.

Mr. Dac was sensitive to his wife's complaints. For years he struggled to provide a good home for his wife, whose grandmother was a descendant of the Vietnamese royal family. He suffered the silent criticism of her relatives, who were in positions of power and influence in Saigon, while he was a low-level civil servant, a refugee from Hanoi who went to South Vietnam in 1954 to begin a new life with few resources.

A Prized Skill

He did speak English, however, a skill that in 1954 was prized by his American rescuers, who then as now relied on the bilingualism of the Vietnamese to carry out the evacuation. Mr. Dac's fluency carried him into several jobs with American military and intelligence units before he became an assistant to a course director in the South Vietnamese Army's National Defense College.

MI These associations convinced Mr. Dac, who is 42, that his position would be untenable in a Communist controlled state, so once it became obvious in early April that South Vietnam was on the verge of collapse, he plotted his family's escape.

Mr. Dac had little money. The family lived in a small house in a slum area of Saigon.

Mrs. Dac had gone to work as a key-punch operator at the Ministry of Land Reform. They had once owned a car, but were forced to sell it when inflation and soaring gasoline prices pinched their income.

In mid-April the Dacs both requested leaves from their jobs and the family journeyed to the seaside resort of Vung Tau, where order had been restored after remnants of an evacuated South Vietnamese Army unit had terrorized the town.

Mr. Dac's plan was to rent a junk that would carry them

to an evacuation flotilla that was expected to form out at sea. But the ships failed to materialize, and the family returned to Saigon, where after several days of desperate effort Mr. Dac was able to get them aboard an American evacuation plane that departed on April 25.

After stops at the Philippines and Guam, the family arrived at Camp Pendleton on May 2, among the first groups of refugees arriving without friends or family in the United States.

"On the eve of our departure in Saigon," says Mrs. Dac, who speaks no English, "we would joke that once we got to the U.S. we would get fat eating American food. But look at him," she continues, indicating the gaunt figure of Mr. Dac seated on the next bed. "His face has become so emaciated despite all the food here."

"How can I eat," Mr. Dac tells a visitor to the hut, "when I have a million worries turning around in my head?"

His principal concern, of course, is that after four weeks in the camp the Dac family is no closer to getting an American sponsor.

Sponsor. It is one of the first words the Vietnamese learn here. Like "Coca-Cola" or "G.I.," it is not translated into Vietnamese. In the mess halls and processing center lines, wherever the refugees gather, the word pops into Vietnamese conversations, uttered almost with a sense of piety and salvation.

Spun-SORE is the way many of the Vietnamese pronounce the word. "Is there any news about a spun-SORE for you?" they ask each other daily.

Mr. Dac held his family back from the official processing because he feared in those first days of confusion following arrival that he and his family would be forced out of the camp to fend for themselves.

"Sitting here is like sitting on hot fire," Mr. Dac said back then, "but the prospect of being kicked out of camp into the streets is even more dreadful."

His wife shared his anxiety. "We will probably be booted and shoved about in the streets," she had said.

Now there is more confidence that they will not end up as beggars in a strange, hostile land. But the prospect of spending many months in Camp 1 can be spiritually debilitating.

"We don't know anything about outside life yet," said Mr. Dac. "My children ask me about American life and customs, such as should they say hello to strangers, and how do the American women get to the market to shop? I do not know many of these answers myself."

The one lesson he has tried to impress on his four sons and daughters, who range in age from 9 to 16, is that they must not be idle.

"I spent half of my lifetime working for Americans," he remarks, "and I know Americans. They work very hard. I tell my children they have to be self-supportive, even when they are young. I want to teach my children to practice working, because no American owes them a penny."

Consequently, everyone in the Dac family has a job in the camp, for which there is no pay. The children work as aides in the mess hall,

helping to clear and clean tables. There is also work to be done in the Quonset hut, where 38 other refugees in addition to the Dacs are quartered.

In the first fortnight here, Mr. Dac helped organize the infrastructure of the Camp 1 command post, designed to give refugees a measure of control in camp life. Since then he has gone to work in a child-care center and school operated by a local agency that has contracted with the Government to provide "survival English" lessons for young refugee children.

Everyone's 'Very Busy'

Mr. Dac's wife and mother also teach at the school, accompanied by a 14-year-old daughter who assists them. The older son, 16, works in the nearby Y.M.C.A. Tent, helping distribute recreation equipment to the refugees.

"We all keep very busy so that time goes by quickly," Mr. Dac relates with a toothy grin that seems to acknowledge that he hopes to attract the interest of Americans who appreciate his family's industry. "Some families just make line for chow and sit around all day," he said. "That is not for us."

After nightfall, however, there is time for reflection, and beyond Mrs. Dac's outward composure this is the time of day she lapses into a melancholy encouraged by thoughts of the fate of her family left behind in Vietnam.

The couple talks softly as the grandmother drifts off to sleep on another bed. A bare electric bulb burns in a ceiling socket. There are

several other hushed conversations among the rows of bunk beds. Soon the children will return, wash up, and the family will sleep.

But Mr. Dac will remain awake in the darkness of the hut until after midnight, the glowing ash of a cigarette his beacon of distress. Among all his concerns, he worries that the family will still be in the camp on June 22.

That is the date of his father's death, and as the oldest son in his family, it is Mr. Dac's responsibility to perform a Confucian ritual to honor his father.

On that day he must prepare an altar of candles and lay out articles of food and clothing and paper money for the benefit of his father's spirit. He will burn incense and call on his father's ghost in an ancient address of fealty and respect:

"Father, today is your anniversary day. We are your son, Mr. Dac. Would you mind to come up and join the family and help give them good health and happiness?"

Since the money and clothing are burned at the conclusion of the ceremony, poor Confucians like Mr. Dac traditionally purchase ersatz money and paper cloth for the ritual from specialty stores. But these materials are not available in the camp, and Mr. Dac has not yet devised the manner in which he shall also succor to the ghost of his dead father.

For the moment, he is troubled that he has such a long way to go to provide for the living, and he is saddened by the weight of that knowledge.