

Language and Skills Handicap One Refugee

By DOUGLAS E. KNEELAND

CAMP PENDLETON, Calif., June 6—Life has never been easy for Nguyen Van Nghi. And it is not likely to be much better now that he has fled Vietnam to start over again in the United States. Not that he really thought it would.

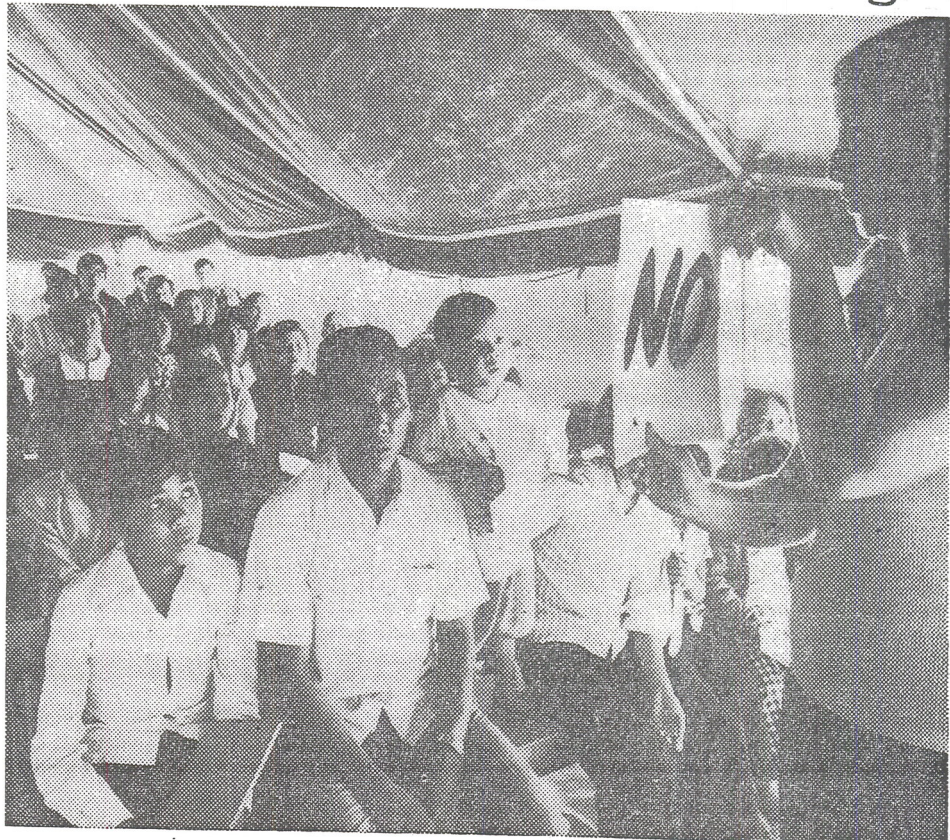
The expectations of a 41-year-old peasant farmer with a few years of primary education and a wife and seven young children do not generally run high, even in his native country. A few acres of land, perhaps, enough food for his family, a little money for clothes and other necessities.

In Long Khanh, a village of 450 families 60 miles west of Saigon, Mr. Nghi, a pleasant man whose occasional gold teeth flash when he smiles shyly, had those things—12 acres of land, a dozen pigs, 500 chickens.

But he was never able to afford even a water buffalo

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

to till his small crops of rice, corn and fruit, let alone a trac-



The New York Times/David Strick

Nguyen Van Nghi, 41, center, a Vietnamese farmer, trying to learn English by means of flash cards in a tent classroom at Camp Pendleton, Calif. He is having great difficulty.

tor.

Now, as he counts the days that he has languished in a tent that houses 16 persons amid the brown hills of this Southern California marine base, he knows that his skills are small, his family large, and his chances of finding a sponsor to place him in a job limited.

Well over half of the more than 130,000 South Vietnamese who left as their country fell to the Communists are, more than two months later, still confined to four military camps in this country and others on such Pacific bases as Guam and Wake.

Can't Find Sponsors

Most of those, according to a study by the President's Interagency Task Force on Indochina Refugees, are well educated or highly skilled middle-class people, large numbers of whom speak some English. And so far a lot of them cannot find sponsors.

The same survey (of 10,039 heads of households) turned up only 10.9 per cent who are classified as having worked in farming, fishing, forestry or related industries, a group that just about everyone associated with the refugee program has predicted will be the most difficult to place.

Mr. Nghi is one of them.

"I'm used to working with my hands," Mr. Nghi, shaking his head, said through an interpreter.

Because he does not drive, he has no knowledge of mechanical farming methods in the United States and has a large family, he added, he is fearful that no sponsor will come forward to rescue him from camp life.

Neither Mr. Nghi nor his wife, Nguyen Thi Lai, 38, nor any of their seven children, who range in age from about a month to 15 years, speaks English.

He explained through the interpreter, Nguyen Luan, that he knew he must learn English to "mix with the American people."

Referring to the basic English classes that have been set up here, as they have at other bases, Mr. Nghi went on:

"I tried, but I couldn't make it. I'll try again, but if I can't make it again, one of the child-

ren will have to follow me everywhere I go to help."

The children, he added ruefully, are learning English fast with "no difficulty."

Why then, with no knowledge of English or of the United States, did he flee his country as the old Saigon regime collapsed and come here.

His story, as he told it through Mr. Luan, was almost tragically simple.

A few days before Saigon was overrun on April 29, his village, Long Khanh, came under shelling by the Communists.

In 1954, when Vietnam was divided, his family, which was Roman Catholic as was most of the population of their hamlet, Bui Chu, had fled from North Vietnam to the south.

After he arrived in the south he was immediately inducted into the army and spent, he recalled with a smile, "five years, nine months and nine days" in the service. For that, the government gave him the 12 acres in Long Khanh to farm.

Only Natural to Go

Given his history of flight from the north, his Roman Catholicism and his years of fighting against the Communists, he felt it was only natural to run from the battle of late April.

At any rate, he packed up his pregnant wife and their six children and headed for Vung Tau on the coast, merely to escape the gunfire.

He left behind his 80-year-old father, his 76-year-old mother and four younger brothers. But another brother, Bui Duc Nghi, 56, his brother's wife and 13 children went with them. He thinks that they and perhaps two other families were the only ones of the 450 in Long Khanh, which is largely Catholic, to escape.

Mr. Nghi insisted that his only thought had been to find safety from the fighting, not to leave the country. But when he got to Vung Tau he saw other families fleeing in boats, so he and his brother hired a boat and took to sea with their wives and children. He said that he had had no idea where the boats were going

and had not heard that he would be sent to the United States until after they were picked up by the Seventh Fleet, 12 hours later.

They were taken to Subic Bay in the Philippines and then on by ship to Guam, where two things important to the life of Mr. Nghi occurred.

First, he lost track of his brother when the two families were placed on separate buses and taken to different refugee camps. He has not heard from him since. Second, his wife gave birth to Nguyen Thi Thom, a third daughter to go with the four sons.

Now, standing in his white shirt, yellow sweater, blue heringbone pants and rubber sandals among the tents at Camp Pendleton, where he has been since June 6, Mr. Nghi looks thoughtful as the interpreter asks if he would like to return to Vietnam.

Despite the confusion of his escape, his acknowledged concern for his family in Long Khanh and his fearfulness about the future, his answer is immediate and short, "Not at any cost."

His decision made, Mr. Nghi returned the other day to one of the 20 tent classrooms on this base where volunteers are teaching English to the refugees, mainly children, who show up for the three-hour-and-a-half sessions a day.

Sitting on a hard wooden bench with his children, except for the baby who remained in their tent with her mother, Mr. Nghi looked perplexed and embarrassed as the young American teacher pointed at posters and urged the class to repeat after her:

"He want some milk. He wants some butter."

"What do I want?" the teacher asked. "I want some milk."

"What do I want?" she asked again.

"You want some milk," the class chanted with the youngsters coming in loudest of all.

Mr. Nghi sat silently, his lips frozen against the strange sounds.

Back in his own tent, sitting glumly on a cot near his wife and new daughter, Mr. Nghi said through the interpreter.

"I will try my best, but I don't know. . ."