

# Refugee family starting over

By JOHN KEARNEY

For most Americans, the Vietnam war ended on April 29, 1975 when the final helicopter left the roof of the U.S. Embassy in downtown Saigon.

The war did not end on that day for Tran Van Khoa. It only intensified and became a very private war.

In the panic that preceded and followed the collapse of South Vietnam, the 65-year-old fisherman was separated from his wife and four of their nine children.

He held on to the rest — all girls — and took them out in his boat into the South China Sea where they clambered aboard a U.S. rescue vessel lying off shore.

Tran and his five daughters found themselves at a reception center at Fort Chaffee, Ark. There they remained for seven months. Until recently.

At dusk on a Wednesday, Tran's private war entered its last days. He arrived with his family in Mill Valley to start a new life under the sponsorship of the Church of Our Lady of Mount Carmel.

But he is still without his wife and the rest of his family. Deep inside, he nourishes the hope they may still be alive and they may one day be reunited.

Gunther Solomon is a parishioner who has helped organize the local sponsorship project which the church calls "Mt. Carmel Operation Welcome."

He is himself a former refugee from Nazi Germany so he knows what it feels like. "It's like being transplanted to the moon," he said.

"We are putting his background together piece by piece," he said last weekend, "and it sounds like a tragic story."

Solomon said it remained unclear how Tran and the rest of his family were separated. In the chaos of the final week of the war, about 200 fishermen

put out to sea in their boats.

Tran was among them. They were non-political but they feared retaliation because they had fled south from northern fishing waters in 1973 when the two sides signed the peace accord at Geneva.

"He hopes the rest of his family were picked up too and are alive somewhere," said Solomon.

Getting from Arkansas to Mill Valley was itself a frightening ordeal for Tran and his family, Cuc (14), Huyen (6), Dung (5) and three-year-old twins Nho and Hong.

Their scheduled United Airlines flight was cancelled because of a strike and they were given American Airlines tickets instead. But they boarded the wrong flight, ending up at Memphis and Dallas. Their luggage went astray somewhere along the way.

On their arrival in San Francisco they were tired, hungry and confused. A welcoming delegation from the church recognized them as they left the plane but there was nobody present who could speak Vietnamese and explain the situation. Handshakes, hugs and sign language made up for it.

Hospitality was put into gear by the time the refugee family arrived at 9 Mountain View, Mill Valley where a \$285-a-month apartment had been equipped with furniture, clothes, toys and food by parishioners headed by Dorothy Gardner.

One room was laid wall-to-wall with five beds, each with a matching quilt.

With still no translator present, parishioners Bert Murray and Dr. Joseph Kitterman attempted to show the eldest girl, Cuc, where everything was located.

She nodded as the workings of the gas stove were explained and drawers and cupboards were opened and closed. Cuc

was taking her new responsibility as "mother" to the family seriously.

Pastor John Ring arrived accompanied by Fr. John Penebsky. When parishioner Diane Scott walked through the door, the five girls went wild with delight. Ms. Scott had become their friend at the airport and was on hand again to organize the first meal for the family in its new home.

Tran sat his five children down before steaming bowls of meat and vegetable soup. His ill-fitting dark suit was crumpled and creased, his face sad with fatigue. He closed his eyes and folded his hands as grace was said.

"Bless us, O Lord, in these Thy gifts which we are about to

receive through Thy bounty. Through Christ Our Lord, Amen."

The words by Fr. Ring were the first words all day Tran felt he fully understood. He did not eat right away.

By Sunday, Tran was in bed with influenza and under the care of Dr. Kitterman.

His five children were taken to the 10 a.m. Mass where they were introduced to the congregation and, afterwards, had coffee and donuts with the church community.

After the family has settled in, attempts will be made to get Tran a job, possibly as a gardener. The younger children will be enrolled at Mt. Carmel parochial school after Christmas and Cuc will probably enter a public school.

In the meantime, the children are to be given a crash course in English. They are also being introduced to other Vietnamese in Marin.

Fr. Ring said: "I'm so happy everyone has shown such an enthusiastic welcome. When we heard from Fort Chaffee they had a dad and his five kids looking for a home . . . I mean, who could say no?"

The federal government gives a \$300 subsidy for the total upkeep of each member of the family. When that is exhausted, they are on their own.

The church has opened an account under the title of "Mt. Carmel Operation Welcome" to assist the family until it can support itself.