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VIETNAMESE REFUGEES FIND NEW HOMES

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A group of 150 refugee families recently boarded a United States ship at the South Vietnamese port of Tuy Hoa. They numbered 832 men, women and children who had been forced to flee their homes in Phu Yen Province to escape marauding Viet Cong guerrillas.

Now they were heading for a new life, new farmlands, and new jobs at Cam Ranh Bay some 160 kilometers farther down the coast.

They brought with them all their worldly possessions -- blankets, furniture, pigs, roosters, chickens, puppies, bicycles and motorbikes. As the bustle and confusion mounted, 38-year-old Phan Thi Diep took the hand of her farmer husband, Nguyen Xuan Hoang, and retired to a quiet corner of the ship below decks. There, aided by two doctors -- U. S. Army Captain Ange J. Lobue and Vietnamese Navy Lieutenant Dang Van Ha Long -- she gave birth to a son.

This group of refugees had come from Phu Yen Province's Hieu Xuong district, midpoint of the Central Vietnam Highlands some 350 kilometers north-east of Saigon.

For many aboard the Page, it was their third uprooting. They had been among the approximately 900,000 refugees who left Communist North Vietnam after the country was partitioned by the 1954 Geneva accords, only to be driven from their new villages and hamlets when the Viet Cong intensified their aggressive activities in the south.

"You cannot live with the Communists," said 39-year-old Nguyen Xuan Hoang, father of the infant who was born as the Page sailed. "The Viet Cong cheat the people, lie to them."

In 1961, Viet Cong harassment, terrorism and confiscation had forced Hoang, his wife, their six children and most of their fellow villagers to abandon their homes and move into Phu Yen Province. Their hamlet of Hoa Chao had flourished until the Viet Cong came, but now, once again, they were refugees from Communist terror.

As the Page sailed southward, the passengers settled down peacefully. Children scampered about and their parents stretched out on straw mats or in hammocks. Drs. Lobue and Long, aided by two medical assistants, set up a clinic and began treating ailments and performing a number of minor operations.

One of the refugees, 61-year-old Tran Van Chao, said he and his wife and 15-year-old son were leaving Phu Yen with no regrets. "I had another son once," he said. "He was in the Army. He was killed last June." But then his eyes brightened as he contemplated the future. "See those?" he asked proudly, pointing to four pigs he had been tending. "I bought them from the government's National Agricultural Credit Organization. No cash. The NACO is giving me five months to pay for them." He sat silent a moment, lost in thought. "Of course it will work out in Cam Ranh Bay."

Tran The Ngoan, 40, a former policeman, sat nearby with his two sons and two daughters. The girls, covered by a blanket, were seasick, and Ngoan comforted them tenderly.

"In Cam Ranh Bay," he said, "the government has promised us land, rice and, above all, jobs. At last my children will have a chance."

Nursing her infant son as her 11-year-old daughter slept by her side. Le Thi Hai said she and her family had been forced from their Hoa Chao hamlet farm by the Viet Cong and for the past year her husband had been working intermittently as a truck driver. "I'm glad to be going to Cam Ranh Bay," she said. "It will be safe there."

At eight o'clock the next morning, the Page sailed into Cam Ranh harbor. After a 40-minute drive in trucks to Suoi Hoa, the 150 families moved into tents and spacious, tin-roofed barracks. They were refugees no longer.

They knew the South Vietnamese government would give each family two months' shelter, six months' ration of rice, 600 square meters of land for house and garden and 500 square meters to farm individually or collectively, roofing, cement and 3,500 piasters with which to buy building materials. Above all, they knew that employment was assured, and that even the totally unskilled workers would receive on-the-job training.

Among those moving into one of the barracks was Phan Thi Diep, whose son had been born 13 hours earlier aboard the Page. Although Vietnamese women customarily spend up to two weeks convalescing from childbirth, Diep had refused to go to the Cam Ranh hospital; she insisted on coming immediately to the site of her new home. As she sat and chatted happily with her neighbors, little Phuong, swaddled in a blanket, lay asleep on the ground at her feet.

It was perhaps fitting that this youngest refugee had been named Phuong. In Vietnamese, Phuong means Phoenix, the legendary bird which every 500 years is consumed by flames, then miraculously renews itself from its own ashes. The new life that awaits young Phuong, too, is a symbol for the South Vietnamese refugees.

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