

## 4. The relocation effort

Operation New Life (April 23 – November 1, 1975) involved the care and processing on Guam of Vietnamese refugees evacuated from Saigon, whether through Operation Frequent Wind or earlier efforts. Under President Gerald Ford's leadership, Congress had passed the Indochina Migration and Assistance Act of 1975, which established the Inter-Agency Task for on Indochinese Refugee Resettlement to execute Operation New Life.

Of the 131,000 Vietnamese refugees resettled through the Inter-Agency Task, 111,000 were transported to Guam, where they were housed in tent cities for a few weeks while being processed for resettlement. The great majority of the refugees were resettled in the United States. A few thousand were resettled in other countries; approximately 1,500 would choose to return to Vietnam, and are known as [the repatriates](#).

The Vietnamese processed on Guam were flown to one of four military bases:

- Fort Chaffee in Arkansas
- Camp Pendleton in California
- Fort Indiantown Gap in Pennsylvania
- Eglin Air Force Base in Florida

In *Vietgone*, the protagonists are sent to Fort Chaffee in Arkansas, while Quang's road trip is towards Camp Pendleton in California.

### Life in Fort Chaffee

Nearly 100,000 Indochinese political refugees came to the United States in 1975. Fort Chaffee took in more than 50,000, which was the largest share.

Despite hostile public sentiment against the Vietnam War in general, the communities offered the refugees an overwhelmingly warm welcome to the camps. At Fort Chaffee, the first wave of refugees were greeted by then-Arkansas Governor David Pryor, local officials, a high school band, about 500 spectators – and a lone protest picket.

“The welcome that we received from the people of Fort Smith was unbelievable. It's actually all positive. I don't have any bad memories,” Hue Tran-Bergher said.

She went on to discuss her memories of her initial arrival: “It was a cool, cloudy, rainy day. It was drizzling a little bit. One of the things I remember, of course, was the welcoming – the people on the side of the road waving the American flag. There were lots of people, and it was just a very warm welcome.”



### Government provisions

The refugees were housed in 235 white-washed army barracks. The grounds also contained a hastily-erected soccer field.

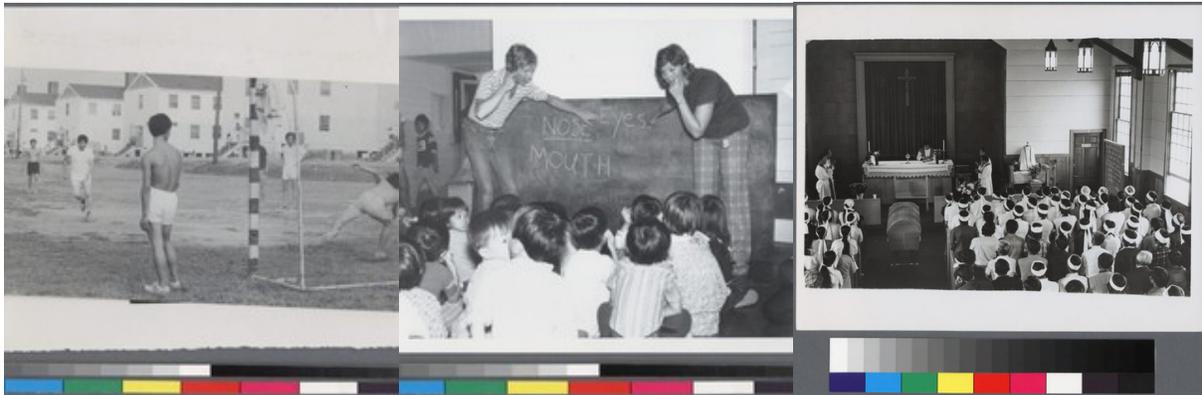


Many of the refugees had left South Vietnam with only the clothes on their backs and a few personal belongings. Almost none of them had warm clothing; they hadn't needed it in the warm

and humid weather of South Vietnam. But in early May, the weather in Arkansas was still relatively chilly. The U.S. government provided the refugees with clothing, food, and other necessities – but they often had to wait in long lines to receive their share.

Beyond providing the basics, the U.S. government also made an active effort to assist the refugees in making the transition to living in America. At Fort Chaffee, the following services were available:

- On May 4, 1975, two days after the first refugees' arrival, a **Vietnamese newspaper, the *Tan Dan***, began publication.
- On October 16, 1975, a **radio station, K224AG/FM**, was established. It broadcast information to the refugees in both English and Vietnamese.
- The local college, Westark Community College (now the University of Arkansas at Fort Smith), set up **classes to teach American culture as well as the English language**. (The classes were made possible through a contract with the Department of Housing, Education and Welfare (now the Department of Health and Human Services.)
- **Forms of entertainment** were provided on a regular basis, intended to help the refugees ease into American culture and also to keep them connected with their own culture. Examples include movie screenings, concerts, a rodeo, and an Independence Day celebration.



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The U.S. government also instituted a **foster family program**. In order to leave the camps, each refugee had to find a sponsor: an American who would help them find housing, employment, and other necessities. Once a sponsor was found, it took about three or four days for the refugee to leave Fort Chaffee, due to the paperwork involved. Often, sponsors would not be located in-state, and so the refugees ended up resettled all over the country. (But in the years to come, the community-oriented Vietnamese would start congregating in large metropolitan areas – more on that in the next section on assimilating to America.)

#### Day-to-day life at Fort Chaffee

Generally, refugees who have spoken to media outlets have relayed relatively positive experiences at Fort Chaffee. By their telling, most of their time was spent waiting in line: for provisions, and then for a foster family.

The Rev. John Tan Nguyen, a minister at Memorial Baptist Church in Tulsa, was among the first wave of refugees to arrive at Fort Chaffee. His plane landed at Fort Smith on May 10. "I remember the first day I arrived at Fort Chaffee very clearly," said Nguyen. "We arrived in the afternoon and it was very beautiful. Everyone was full of anxiety. None of us had ever heard of Fort Chaffee or Arkansas. But mixed in with the anxiety was a special sense of relief. We were relieved because we had made it here safely. It was a very relaxing time for most of the refugees. After what most of the people had been through in Vietnam with the war and then trying to get out, the waiting to be resettled was very nice. You met a lot of new friends and got to slow down. I would say most people who went through it are very grateful to the people for what was done for us and well we were treated."

In describing the day-to-day life at Fort Chaffee, the Rev. Tam Ngoc Nguyen (now a Catholic priest in Tahlequah) said, "It was a lot like being in a Vietnamese village. I don't think you missed home very much while you were there. There were lots of other Vietnamese people there and it was hot and muggy like home. It was green and beautiful. I think people really liked it there. The culture shock came when you were relocated. When you went out into American society is when it hit home that you were very, very far from home. That's when you got homesick. That's when you started missing your mother and brothers and sisters."

Le Ri, now a Tulsa businessman who owns two restaurants, concurred with that sentiment. "It wasn't bad at all," he said. "I have nice memories of Fort Chaffee and I think most people who relocated through there have nice memories. I waited there six months with my wife and 2-year-old daughter. There wasn't much to do except sit around and wait to get a sponsor family. It was enjoyable. You had time to sit and talk to others who faced the same thing as you. You met new friends. You had an opportunity to learn English. Your worries started the day you left the camp. That's when you started worrying about work and supporting a family. Fort Chaffee was crowded but a very nice place to start a new life in America."

Meanwhile, Nguyen (not to be confused with John Tan Nguyen), who arrived at Fort Chaffee on June 22, 1975, spoke about the U.S. government's efforts to provide entertainment options. "There were thousands of people there when I arrived," Nguyen said. "I remember the first night I arrived, there was a concert by Khanh Ly, one of the most popular singers in Vietnam. There were so many people there they had to move the concert to the baseball field. There were people sitting everywhere. She sang traditional Vietnamese songs and it was a very moving experience. Here we were, thousands of miles from our home in a new country, sitting under the stars and listening to music from our homeland. I'll never forget the expression on the faces of people sitting around me."

But despite these positive accounts, life at Fort Chaffee did pose some challenges. As one example, on June 20, 1975, a group of eighty Vietnamese held a demonstration, frustrated by how long they'd waited to be processed. Two days later, a second demonstration was held by 600 refugees in counter to the previous protest, to thank the Americans for their help. As another example, the camp housed several top-ranking South Vietnamese government officials; some of the other refugees felt that the officials were responsible for losing their home country to the North Vietnamese. As a final example, because people had to wait in long lines to obtain necessities, sometimes the right care would not get to the old, the sick, or the otherwise vulnerable in time.

A minimal amount of crime also occurred within Fort Chaffee. According to the Provost Marshal report, the refugees were the perpetrators and victims of cases of five rapes, 22 cases of aggravated assault, 266 cases of larceny, and two suicide attempts. There were 517 offenses in all, less than half of which (212) were perpetrated by the refugees. But because over 50,000 people passed through the camp, ultimately *less than 1 per cent* of the refugees experienced or perpetrated criminal activity.

Finally, 325 children were born to refugees while they were living at Fort Chaffee. These children were automatically granted American citizenship as they were born on American soil.

#### Further reading

- Recap of Hue Tran-Bergher's [2015 walkthrough of the campgrounds](#)
- Some foster families' accounts of [why they chose to sponsor refugees](#)