

Operation NEW ARRIVAL: Eglin provides new hope to refugees

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Stories of the Vietnam war are wrought with frustration, from the draft of young recruits to difficult fighting conditions to the eventual fall of Saigon to the Communists. One story, that was a bright ray of light shining beyond a failed war in Southeast Asia was Operation NEW ARRIVAL. Amid rapidly deteriorating conditions in Saigon, Eglin AFB would become the landing zone for many Vietnamese families, who would eventually become American citizens. Operation NEW ARRIVAL, receiving over 10K refugees was successful through a cohesive teamwork of military, robust community support, and detailed planning based upon urgent need to resettle Vietnamese considered at-risk from the incoming Communist regime.

During the chaos of the fall of Saigon, the encroaching Communist forces threatened Operation FREQUENT WIND the USAF airlift evacuation operations. Airlift operations tapered off at Tan Son Nhut AB as the threat of North Vietnamese artillery impacted inside the wire threaten personnel and resources with one C-130 destroyed by indirect fires on its way to onload at-risk Vietnamese refugees. Eventually, the falling shells halted the airlift in early April 1975. The ongoing evacuation of Vietnamese to neighboring countries temporarily would result in a urgent need to permanently settle thousands of Vietnamese. On 28 April 1975, CJCS selected Eglin AFB, among four refugee centers to receive and settle refugees. Armament Development and Test Center (ADTC) Commander, Major General Henry Kucheman Jr. assembled staff that worked long into the night to brainstorm requirements and determine the most suitable site to construct a refugee camp that might potentially reach a population of 20,000. That same day, ADTC chose Auxiliary Field 2, Pierce Field, for construction of the new camp, and almost immediately construction activity.

Auxiliary Field 2, located on FL 285, served as a training facility for Hurlburt Field's 823d RED HORSE Squadron (RHS) during the Vietnam war. During construction the camp, 823 RHS was among over 1,200 personnel to ready the site and begin building a tent city. Over 130 flights delivered materials and supplies, some directly to Pierce Field. Within only days, on 4 May 1975, the first 373 refugees arrived at Eglin, ready to begin a new future. Within only 1 month, the Eglin processing center had received over 5,200 Vietnamese, some of which were resettled in the local area, and elsewhere with the support of sponsor families. By July, the refugee population peaked at just over 6,000.

Life in the camp was very detail oriented and organized. Families were housed together as a unit. In each tent was an assigned refugee leader, several tents comprised a village, also was assigned a leader. Each



South Vietnamese refugees preparing for departure.



Loading luggage.

HISTORY

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village was assigned a liaison team of two officers and three NCO's. Cultural differences were a difficult hurdle. Early on, Hurlburt's Special Operations School, who trained soldiers on Vietnamese culture, used their knowledge once again, providing needed assistance to refugees as well as assisting liaisons. Additionally, a bilingual newsletter, "The New Land" was produced by a refugee to keep refugees informed. A primary concern was keeping residents active. One Vietnamese man, who escaped his country with his construction level led a team of 25 refugees to conduct work around the camp, and later had a successful carpentry business in Pensacola.



South Vietnamese refugees arriving at Eglin AFB.

By August 1975, the camp was nearing its planned end, in anticipation of the Emerald Coast hurricane season. In four months, the camp had processed and relocated over 10,000 Vietnamese, including 28 "new arrivals", born in the camp. Only about 1,000 refugees remained at the end of August. By 15 September, the final refugees departed, and the Operation NEW ARRIVAL camp closed four days later, followed by the landfall of Hurricane Eloise that left 2x4's of the tent city resembling "toothpicks." NEW ARRIVAL provided the blueprint for future humanitarian responses and coordination with sister services, other agencies, and as always reliant support of the Emerald Coast Community. The coordinated planning efforts resulted in safe lodging as well as providing a launch pad for the future of thousands of Vietnamese Americans.

SOURCES:

Bruce Rolfsen, "Refugees brought war home: As Saigon fell, a Tent city went up on Eglin's Field 2," Northwest Florida Daily News, 30 April 1995.

ADTC/HO, "Operation NEW ARRIVALS Phase I-The Buildup," July 1975.

ADTC/HO, "Operation NEW ARRIVALS Phase II-The Pipeline," August 1975.

ADTC/HO, Operation NEW ARRIVALS Chronology-Eglin Refugee Processing Center (27 April 1975-19 September 1975), n.d.

RECOMMENDED READING:

James D. Pham, "A Fathers Gift," Amazon Kindle Direct Publishing, 2020.



South Vietnamese children playing tetherball.



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