Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Vietnamese Refugees 1975

Elisa Leonelli · Wednesday, June 28th, 2017

On May 8, 1975 I was invited by Newsweek's staff photographer Lester Sloane to accompany him on a special assignment: to photograph the Vietnamese refugees just arrived at Camp Pendleton after the fall of Saigon. I suppose he thought that a woman's eye would be helpful in this situation.


Vietnamese refugees. Camp Pendelton, California. May 8, 1975

We found hundreds of women and children housed in tents and barracks at this Marines military base in Southern California. The warm sunny weather felt cold to them, used to the humid tropical heat of Southern Vietnam, so they huddled under blankets, borrowed coats and sweaters. They seemed happy and hopeful, despite having left their home country for good, facing an uncertain future.


Vietnamese refugees. Camp Pendelton, California. May 8, 1975

It was an amazing experience for me in my early days as a professional photographer. I had received my first magazine assignment in late 1974 from Colman Andrews, then editor of COAST Magazine. I was to join more established photographers, such as Antonin Kratochvil, Gary Krueger, Brian Leatart and Don Peterson, in photographing the 100 Best Places in California for the December issue.


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Forty years later, Scott McGaugh, who had seen 3 of these photos on my website, wrote me: "Your talent is captured in ever frame!" He was curating an exhibit at the San Diego History Center and asked if he could include my photos. I happily agreed. In 1975 I had printed my favorite frames into 8x10s with a white border, and in 2012 I had scanned those prints, so I sent him 8 images. Then I had all the original negatives scanned by a lab, and chose 26 images, out of 2 rolls of film of 36 exposures. Not a bad yield.


Vietnamese refugees. Camp Pendelton, California. May 8, 1975

Scott would later send me a copy of the book with a few of my photos, *The Military in San Diego*, published in 2015 to coincide with the 40th Anniversary of "Operation Frequent Wind." That was

the code name for the final helicopter evacuation of 6000 American civilians and at-risk Vietnamese from Saigon on April 29 and 30, 1975, to the aircraft carrier USS Midway, prior to the takeover of the city by the North Vietnamese Army. Eventually 50,000 Southeast Asian refugees were brought to a 10-square-mile community of tents and huts at Camp Pendleton, where they would spend weeks and months, as church groups and other organizations looked for jobs and permanent homes for them.

Vietnamese refugees. Camp Pendelton, California. May 8, 1975

For the complete series, click on this link to Vietnamese Refugees in the Elisa Leonelli Photojournalist Collection on the website of Claremont Colleges Digital Library.

Vietnamese refugees. Camp Pendelton, California. May 8, 1975

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