

WELCOME TO TENT CITY



Author Kristen Mai Pham and her mom walking in "Tent City" at Camp #8, Camp Pendleton, 1975. Photo courtesy of the author

By Kristen Mai Pham

When my family and I first set foot on American soil in 1975, we were physically exhausted, emotionally devastated, malnourished, dehydrated, homesick, and very frightened about our uncertain future, having survived the perilous journey from our war-torn homeland of Vietnam as one of the first waves of "boat people." And yet, it was still the happiest day of our lives because we had arrived in America, the land of safety, freedom, and kindness.

We had lived a life of privilege and

comfort in Vietnam. My father was a successful, self-made man who had married my mother, the sheltered daughter of my industrious, widowed grandmother. We had housekeepers to help us with everything we needed. Life was very good.

This life of privilege was abruptly ripped from underneath us when the Communists overthrew the existing government of South Vietnam on April 30, 1975. Our beloved home was no longer our home. Consequently, my family and I had to flee the country during this terrifying mass exodus. We barely made it out, with much fear in our hearts.

Beset by chaos and unrest, we boarded a small, dilapidated ship to flee the country. Our journey was plagued by physical hardship, extreme seasickness, and harsh storms. I have a blurry memory of nearly falling overboard when a severe storm rocked the ship violently, throwing my father, who was holding me in his arms, off-balance as he stood too close to the railing. I did not know how to swim, so had I fallen into the treacherous waters below, it probably would have been the end of me, and the end of my story.

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Another frightening obstacle that we faced was the inadequate quantities of food and water. I remember asking my mother if we could go home because the drinking water on the ship smelled like gasoline. My mother replied simply, "We can never go home again, so please drink the water, Mai." She must have been devastated, terrified, and grief-stricken, but she did her best to remain calm.



Kristen Mai Pham at the former Camp #8 site, Camp Pendleton, 2017. Courtesy photo

After what seemed like an eternity of sea and air travel, we eventually landed in Camp Pendleton, California, as a result of the U.S. government program called Operation New Life. Through various collaborative efforts by the American Red Cross, the Catholic Church, and other humanitarian organizations, we received medical care and much needed hope.

According to The San Diego Union-Tribune, nearly 900 Marines and civilians worked for six days to erect "Tent City," a collection of 958 tents, 140 Quonset huts, a newly installed sewage system and communication lines. Tent City would eventually shelter, clothe, educate, feed, and even entertain 50,000 Vietnamese refugees. If this massive undertaking wasn't a feat that was propelled by kindness, compassion, and generosity, I don't know what is.

In retrospect, I realized that some of those same Marines may have either gallantly fought in the Vietnam War, known someone who had fought in the Vietnam War, or had lost someone who fought in the Vietnam War.

And yet, there they were, working tirelessly to build a temporary home for thousands of Vietnamese refugees who were preparing for a new life in America in the aftermath of this terrible war. This realization moved me tremendously.

Even though we were living in makeshift tents, our life was finally calm for the first time in weeks. While I

was too young to remember many specifics, I do have some lingering, fond memories of playing Frisbee on the warm summer days, standing in lines for delicious American foods like hot dogs and doughnuts, and seeing the smiles of the kind American Marines stationed at Camp Pendleton who helped us in innumerable ways. Considering that the Vietnamese are a race of relatively short stature, these American Marines looked like gentle giants next to my father and mother, who both stood five feet, one inch tall.

Through the Catholic Church's efforts to help Vietnamese refugees, a benevolent sponsor family took us into their home and hearts. While we lived with this sponsor family for



Aerial view of Tent Camp #8, Camp Pendleton, 1975. Photo courtesy of Camp Pendleton Archives

Welcome to Tent City, Cont.

several weeks, they were instrumental in helping us to rebuild our lives. Mom and Dad learned to drive in America and soon found employment. Meanwhile, my siblings and I enrolled in school; we had to learn English in record time. Looking back at this time, I am certain of one undeniable truth: Had it not been for our sponsor family, there was no way that we could have successfully assimilated into our new lives. For this, I am eternally grateful to them. I am still in touch with my sponsor family, and I am so thrilled to be a part of their lives.

Forty-four years later, I am extremely proud to call myself a Vietnamese-American. When I remember those days at Camp Pendleton, I remember the kindness of the Marines, the Catholic Church, the American Red Cross and volunteers who helped to lovingly welcome us to our new home. When I think of my sponsor family, I think of the kind Americans who enriched our lives, nurtured our souls,

and gave us faith in humanity, with open arms.

I am forever indebted to the compassion, hospitality, and generosity of the Americans who welcomed us in the summer of 1975. I wish that I could reach out to the countless Marines and volunteers of Camp Pendleton to express my gratitude for their kindness and to reciprocate in some way. Regretfully, I don't even know any of their names. John F. Kennedy once said: "As we express our gratitude, we must never forget that the highest appreciation is not to utter words, but to live by them." So, I will repay their charity from those many years ago by being the best American I can be. And by being kind and offering a friendly welcome to the next newcomers to our nation.

Editor's note:

In the second half of her life, Kristen Mai Pham is finally following her dream to be a writer. She is very proud to be a ten-time contributing author for the iconic Chicken Soup for the Soul anthologies and a contributor to the Orange County Register. Kristen is also a screenwriter and hopes to see her work produced for film or television soon. Follow her on Instagram @kristenmaipham or email her at kristenmaipham3@gmail.com.



Kristen Mai Pham at the Hand of Hope monument aboard Camp Pendleton, 2017. Courtesy photo

President's Message

Richard B. Rothwell



As with many organizations and individuals, Coronavirus 19 restrictions have had a significant effect on CPHS plans. Our fourth annual "Golf with a Hero" Golf Tournament, originally scheduled for April, had to be postponed. We are closely following State and San Diego County reopening guidelines and are working with the Omni La Costa Resort & Spa to reschedule the golf tournament later this year.

In March, I submitted the CPHS offer to donate a monument to Major General

Joseph H. Pendleton to the Marine Corps for permanent placement aboard Camp Pendleton. The offer is being reviewed by the Base staff. That process may take longer than we had originally hoped because of Marine Corps concerns about the possible impact of that monument on another important historical project.

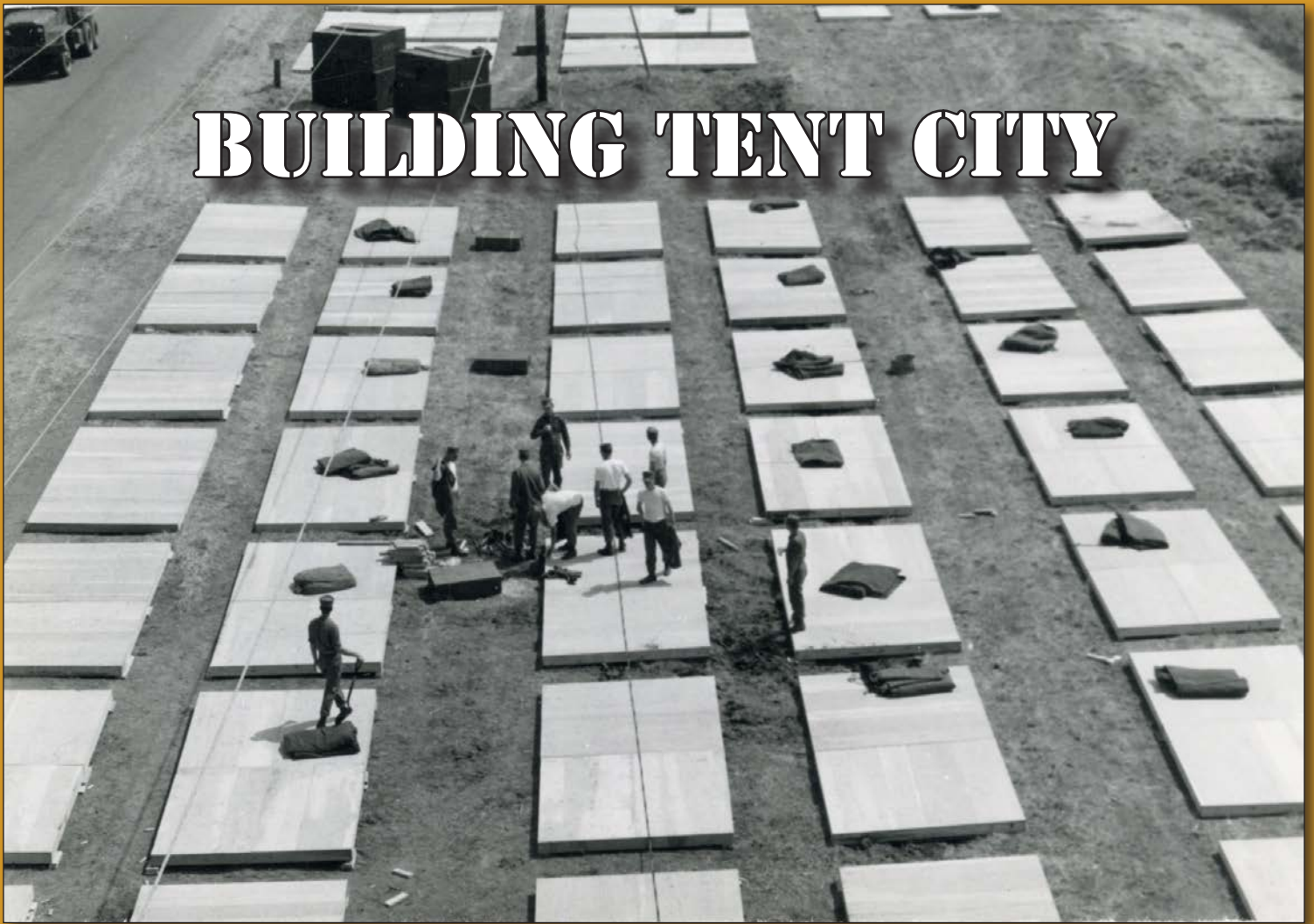
Camp Pendleton is seeking to place the historic 1st Marine Division headquarters building, informally known as the White House, on the National Register of Historic Places. For a number of years, the Marine Corps has been seeking funding to build new command post for the Division. When that happens, the old building would typically be demolished to save maintenance costs. Placing the Division headquarters building on the National Register would protect that building from demolition. There is concern by some members of the Base

staff that the Pendleton monument, which we plan to place near the White House, might affect its eligibility for placement on the National Register. CPHS does not expect further action on our donation offer until the Marine Corps is assured that it will not negatively influence the White House's eligibility. That could take several additional months.

During these troubled times, your Board of Directors is conducting business by email and conference calls. So far, that has kept all of us well. I trust that similar precautions by you and your families have kept you and yours well also. Thank you for your continued support. I look forward to providing additional information in the next edition of the Groundbreaker.

Richard B. Rothwell

BUILDING TENT CITY



Marines from 1st and 7th Engineer Battalions, 1st Marine Division prepare sites for the erecting of tents as temporary quarters for the Vietnamese refugees at Camp Cristianitos, Camp Pendleton, Calif. on May 2, 1975. Photos courtesy of the Camp Pendleton Archives



Marines from 1st Marine Regiment, 1st Marine Division, use a jackhammer to drive stakes into the ground for anchoring of tents on April 28, 1975.



A civilian maintenance crew works to install new power lines into Camp Cristianitos to provide electricity for the Vietnamese refugee camp on May 2, 1975.



Marines from 7th Engineer Battalion erect temporary quarters at Camp Talega for the expected Vietnamese refugees on April 28, 1975



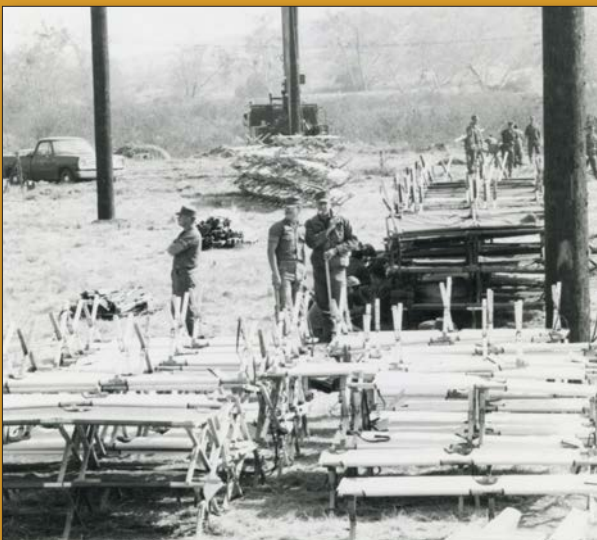
1st Engineer Battalion Marines level the site of a future dining hall at Camp Cristianitos on May 1, 1975

"A series of tent camps will be constructed at the rate of 135 tents a day to give the base a capability to house 2,800 refugees per day through the first week in May (1975)"

Lt. Col. A. P. Brill,
Base Public Affairs Officer



Marines from 1st Marine Regiment break out tentage from trucks at Camp Talega during the erection of a tent camp on April 28, 1975.



Marines from the 1st Marine Division pause for a short while during the assembling of cots for the temporary billeting of refugees at Camp Talega on April 30, 1975.



An excavator parked near the trench dug for a water line between the rows of tents at the refugee camp at Camp Cristianitos on May 2, 1975.



A dining hall tent assembled with a myriad of tables and chairs.



Aerial view of Tent Camp #5, Camp Pendleton, 1975.



A tent city at Camp Talega built by Marines to house an expected 18-20,000 Vietnamese refugees, 1975.



Brig. Gen. Paul Graham, USMC pauses to shake hands and converse with Khai Quang Le, a refugee in Camp #8 on June 4, 1975.



A Vietnamese refugee family relaxes within the comforts of their tent located aboard Camp Pendleton on July 11, 1975.



A Vietnamese Buddhist priest from Los Angeles, Calif., holds a religious service for the refugees in one of the tent camps on May 4, 1975.



Getting a haircut outside of the "Barber Shop" tent established by the refugees in one of the tent camps on May 8, 1975.

Upcoming Events

4th Annual "Golf With A Hero" Charity Golf Tournament

Planned for Sept. 16, 2020, the event will take place at the golf course at the Omni La Costa Resort and Spa (2614 Lewis Lane, Carlsbad, Calif.). Each foursome will be comprised of one active duty Marine and three other golfers, providing an excellent opportunity for golfers to converse with Marines who have recent worldwide experience carrying out the mission of the Marine Corps. Tickets are \$150 per golfer and can be purchased via Eventbrite at: <http://bit.ly/3cSAJT8>



2nd Annual "Old Corps" Marine Corps Birthday Celebration

Planned for Nov. 7, 2020 at the Omni La Costa Resort and Spa; more details to follow.



4th Military Children's Golf Clinic

In a recurring partnership between CPHS and Pro Kids / First Tee of San Diego, this free clinic for children of Camp Pendleton military families is being planned for a date (TBD) during the week of Nov. 23-27, 2020 at the Pro Kids / First Tee Oceanside Campus (821 Douglas Drive, Oceanside, Calif.).

As you are very aware, COVID-19 has made scheduling and attending events like the above challenging at best. If changes to these events are required, we will notify our members via our website and Facebook pages. Thank you for your continuing support and patience.

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