ABSTRACT

RAPER, LAUREN E. “Blest be the Ties that Bind:” The 1986 Montagnard Resettlement to Greensboro, North Carolina and the Reshaping of the Memory of the Vietnam War. (Under the direction of Dr. Nancy Mitchell).

In 1986, a group of 209 Montagnards from the Central Highlands of Vietnam was relocated to Greensboro, North Carolina. Utilizing interviews with the volunteers and the Montagnards, as well as U.S. State Department documents and press reports, this thesis chronicles the Montagnards’ journey from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Thailand to North Carolina. It examines the roles that veterans, Lutheran Family Services of North Carolina, and local volunteers played in facilitating the Montagnards’ resettlement.

First, this thesis explains who the Montagnards are, their relationship with the U.S. military during the Vietnam War, and how they arrived at the Thai refugee camp where they made contact with veterans in the United States and requested resettlement. It details how a small group of veterans lobbied the U.S. government and led a media campaign to educate the American people about the Montagnards and elicit support for their resettlement. Veterans marketed the Montagnard group as loyal American allies who had been abandoned by the U.S. military and government at the end of the war. Implicit in their rhetoric was a call to the American people to rectify this mistake. This study argues that the Montagnards’ affiliation with the U.S. military during the Vietnam War differentiated them from other refugee groups and was a key reason why their resettlement was expedited by the U.S. government.

Secondly, this study describes the unique challenges of the Montagnard resettlement and how the local volunteers prepared for the Montagnards’ arrival in
Greensboro. Lutheran Family Services of North Carolina was chosen by the U.S. State Department to facilitate the resettlement because of its past successes, its close relationship with community volunteers, and its location in North Carolina. Lutheran Family Services recruited church sponsors, procured housing, solicited food and clothing donations, secured jobs for the refugees, and educated the people of Greensboro about Montagnard culture and history. It appealed to Christian compassion and patriotism to solicit sponsors and volunteers. Understanding what Lutheran Family Services did helps explain why the Montagnards were able to assimilate successfully to American society.

This thesis also considers why local volunteers participated in the resettlement by examining who the volunteers were, what they did, and how the community reacted to the Montagnards in their midst.

Finally, this research places the Montagnard story within the context of historic memory and raises questions of how Americans’ collective memory of the Vietnam War may be shaped and revised through refugee resettlements. It argues that veterans, Lutheran Family Services staff, and local volunteers formed memory activist groups to selectively market the Montagnards as loyal and brave American soldiers who were abandoned by the U.S. government in order to garner support for their resettlement. This study examines how the Montagnard resettlement may be understood as a living memorial to the Vietnam War; a memorial meant to atone for and reconstruct negative memories of the war.
“Blest be the Ties that Bind:” The 1986 Montagnard Resettlement to Greensboro, North Carolina and the Reshaping of the Memory of the Vietnam War

by
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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of North Carolina State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts

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DEDICATION

To Mom and Dad, who taught me the importance of education, hard work, and perseverance.

And to Mammaw Myrtle for teaching me to love life.

And to Reid, whose steady, easy-going nature gives me peace and calm.
Lauren Elizabeth Raper was born in China Grove, NC. She graduated from North Carolina State University with degrees in History and Spanish Language in 2005 and will receive a Masters of Arts in History from North Carolina State University in May 2009.
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“A Place to Call Home”

My future changed when I answered an ad in the Technician, North Carolina State University’s newspaper, to help a retired doctor do his daily office chores. Like all graduate students living in indentured servitude, I put on my professional but cheery voice and sold my exaggerated office and organizational skills to secure a second job. After being hired by Dr. Surry Roberts, a visually impaired, retired Raleigh rheumatologist, I assumed the job of reading and transcribing Dr. Roberts’s daily emails and letters. I continually had to ask how to spell strange names such as Vien Sui, Rong Nay, Hip Ksor, and Y Guk Cil that sounded like none I had ever encountered. I thought to myself, “Dr. Roberts is from Pine Town, North Carolina, a tiny eastern town never dotted on maps, his southern accent is stronger than mine, a feat accomplished by only a select few. Who are these people with such different names, where are they from, and how does Dr. Roberts know them?”

It was not very long until I was able to match the strange names to faces. While I was working, these people would stop by the house to speak with Dr. Roberts, always bringing him a gift of fruit or candy. Dr. Roberts introduced me to his friends as they entered the house with wide smiles and outstretched hands repeating “hello.” From their thick accents and broken English I knew they were not Americans; their dark skin and slightly oval eyes reminded me of Native Americans; their facial features and short stature looked Indian or Asian. My intrigue was on overdrive; I had to know who these people were. Curiosity overcame decorum; I stopped typing and interrupted Dr. Roberts’s dictation to ask him about his friends. This was the first time I learned about the plight of the Montagnards.
Cultural anthropologist Mary Pipher explains that “[r]efugees and immigrants are often hidden in plain sight;” and if you live in, or have visited, Raleigh, Greensboro, or Charlotte, North Carolina chances are you have seen or met a Montagnard.\(^1\) Unknowingly, you have probably strolled past them in the supermarket, stood in line with them at the bank, or even worked beside of them in your workplace. According to the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, as of 2007, the state was home to more than 8,000 Montagnards, the largest population outside of Vietnam.\(^2\) According to the Cultural Orientation Resource Center, North Carolina was specifically chosen by the United States’ State Department as the resettlement location for Montagnards “because of the number of Special Forces veterans living in the area, the supportive business climate with numerous entry-level job opportunities, and a terrain and climate similar to what the refugees had known in their home environment.”\(^3\)

But while the North Carolina Montagnard community is large, culturally vibrant, and growing, very little is known about the Montagnards’ journey to North Carolina. Even though the local media have reported extensively about the Montagnards and many North Carolina communities have been mobilized to help their resettlement, very few scholars have

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focused specifically on the Montagnards in the United States.\textsuperscript{4} This thesis will explain the Montagnards’ exodus from Thailand to the United States and will examine the role that local organizations and communities played in helping them establish new lives in the United States. It argues that the Montagnard resettlement may be interpreted as a living memorial to the Vietnam War which seeks to atone for and reconstruct negative memories of the war.

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Histories of Southeast Asian refugee resettlement in the United States are growing, but the Montagnard story is often grouped with other Southeast Asian minority groups. Moreover, because the Montagnards were resettled after the main exodus of Southeast Asian refugees they have received less scholarly attention than other groups.

In the aftermath of the Vietnam War the world witnessed an explosion of Southeast Asian refugees. Throughout the late 1970s and 1980s, internal insecurity within Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam caused by war, political instability and bloody regime changes, natural disasters such as famine and drought, and various forms of religious, ethnic, and political persecution created thousands of refugees and displaced persons who poured across borders and onto the seas seeking asylum.\textsuperscript{5} Much of the scholarship explaining the complicated causes of the Southeast Asian exodus and the confusing policy decisions dictating their resettlement has focused either on the role of the United Nations and the U.S. federal government or on the refugees’ experiences. Very little attention has been given to

\textsuperscript{4} Several newspapers that have written about the Montagnard resettlement and that will be used in this study are: Greensboro News and Record, The Durham Morning Herald, and The New York Times.

how volunteer agencies and local communities mobilized to assist resettlement and how resettlements may be interpreted as war memorials.

One of the most comprehensive histories of Indochinese refugees and resettlement is *Terms of Refuge, the Indochinese Exodus and the International Response*, by W. Courtland Robinson. Robinson closely examines, in almost distracting detail, the various programs designed and implemented after the Vietnam War by the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), countries of first asylum, resettlement host countries, and the refugees’ home countries in order to assess the successes and failures of international refugee policy. After researching different refugee groups and chronicling how the international community responded to their situations throughout the late 1970s and into the late 1990s, Robinson argues that “the international refugee regime moved from a bias toward exile and resettlement to a bias toward prevention, containment and return” of refugees to countries of origin.  

While Robinson provides an excellent account of the UNHRC and the international response to the refugees, he does not discuss how local organizations worked to resettle the refugees once they were allowed into a country. There is no discussion of the micro impact of refugee resettlement. Even though he recounts the national and federal government impact, he does not detail how the more tedious and demanding work of refugee resettlement takes place at the local level, where volunteers and community organizations must band together to provide refugees with food, shelter, and clothing as well as cultural orientation so they can survive in their new country.

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6 Ibid., 290.
Of course the policies of the UNHRC and federal governments are important and should be studied and scrutinized; however, history does not stop at the global and federal level. In the case of the Montagnards, it was concerned citizens who pressured the U.S. government to grant them special refugee status. Also, once the Montagnards reached the United States, the non-profit agency Lutheran Family Services of North Carolina coordinated housing, jobs, daycare, medical care, transportation, and a host of other necessities to help the Montagnards establish successful lives in the United States.

One study that does address the role of communities in refugee resettlement is Ethnic Origins by Jeremy Hein. Hein, a professor of sociology at the University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire, explains how and why local volunteers in four Mid-West cities resettled Hmong and Cambodian refugees. He argues that the way American communities react to refugees “reveals a pattern of American race and ethnic relations that can be termed ‘small-town hospitality and hate.’” Ethnic Origins has provided a model for this research and expertly analyzes the motivations behind the volunteers’ actions; but it does not go into detail about what the volunteers did or how crucial their actions were for the success of the resettlement. This study modifies Hein’s argument that refugee resettlements follow a pattern of “hospitality and hate.” While some racism and apprehension was voiced against the Montagnards, many negative reactions to their resettlement were ameliorated due to the Montagnards’ affiliation with the U.S. military, the small size of the group, and the fact that

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9 Ibid., 80.
the majority of the group was older and beyond gang affiliation. This research will build on
*Ethnic Origins*, explaining how Lutheran Family Services of North Carolina prepared for the
Montagnards’ arrival and detailing how volunteers from the Greensboro community worked
daily with them to ease their integration into the community. It also seeks to expand the
interpretation of the significance of refugee resettlements by arguing that the Montagnard
resettlement provided local communities an opportunity to participate in the renegotiation of
the memory of the Vietnam War by serving as a living memorial to the war.

Scholarly writing about Southeast Asian refugees that does not focus on the macro-
political level has tended to concentrate on the refugee experience. One example of this is
*The Middle of Everywhere; the World’s Refugees Come to Our Home* by historian Mary
Pipher. Pipher briefly addresses the local community and volunteer agencies; however, her
focus is the refugees’ experience. By telling stories about refugees who have been resettled
in or moved to Nebraska, Pipher discusses how refugees were received by the local
community, how they tried to preserve their culture and heritage, how they worked to
assimilate to American culture, and what refugees found most difficult about adjusting to life
outside of their country. Pipher does not focus on the mechanics: did the refugees have a
sponsor, how were sponsors assigned, what did the sponsoring organizations do for the
refugee, what did community volunteers do to help the refugees adjust? Pipher’s goal is to
examine the personal difficulties of being a refugee in a new country, not to explain the roles,
decisions, and sacrifices of the local community.\(^\text{10}\)

\(^{10}\) Mary Pipher, *In the Middle of Everywhere.*
Again, just as the case with the UNHRC and governmental policies, understanding the refugee experience is essential, but historians also need to consider all of the lives that are impacted by refugee resettlement. The experiences, motivations, and emotions of the volunteers who help to resettle refugees deserve attention. As this research will show, the volunteers and workers of Lutheran Family Services who helped resettle the Montagnards gave unselfishly of their time, money, and resources to help the Montagnards begin a new life in North Carolina. And as the volunteers attest, their lives were enriched and they were educated by helping the Montagnards. Volunteer Becky Shore of the First Lutheran Church of Greensboro states, “It’s [working with refugees, Montagnards and Cambodians] the most fulfilling thing, other than being a mother, that I’ve ever done.”\textsuperscript{11} Volunteer Doug Hinton of Mt. Pisgah Methodist Church states that working with the Montagnards made him realize that “he should have went into social work” instead of accounting, and that he “fell in love” with the Montagnard people and misses working so closely with them.\textsuperscript{12} Clearly the lives of these volunteers and their perception of other cultures and people were changed by their experiences.

Also deserving of more in-depth analysis in the entire refugee conversation is the issue of diversity. The world’s refugee populations are comprised of very diverse groups of people who experience being a refugee differently. For example, refugees of ethnic minority groups, like the Hmong and Montagnards, may experience discrimination or more difficult conditions in refugee camps and countries of first asylum. Or, because of refugees’ political affiliations, first asylum countries may deny them entry.

\textsuperscript{11} Becky Shore, interview by Lauren Raper, Greensboro, NC, August 28, 2008.
\textsuperscript{12} Doug Hinton, interview by Lauren Raper, Greensboro, NC, August 28, 2008.
One example of how diversity has been handled by historians is evident in *Vietnamese Refugees in Southeast Asian Camps* by historian Linda Hitchcox. Hitchcox states that the Vietnamese in Southeast Asian refugee camps “come from a variety of backgrounds, different ethnic groups, religions, education, skills, and social classes,” but even though Hitchcox acknowledges the diversity within the Vietnamese refugee population, she does not analyze how the diversity may impact the refugees’ treatment.\(^{13}\)

Other historians have approached Southeast Asian refugee studies by evaluating different ethnic groups separately to examine how their ethnicity may have influenced how they experienced being a refugee. In *Indochinese Refugees in America*, historians Paul Strand and Woodrow Jones, Jr. briefly discuss the cultural and political backgrounds of Laotian, Hmong, Khmer, Vietnamese, and ethnic Chinese refugees separately. This enables them to explain how and why each group had different experiences within the camps, but their analysis is brief.\(^{14}\) In *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, historian Anne Fadiman studies the Hmong people and explains how their native culture affected the process of American assimilation. This book is a great example of how historians may glean a better understanding of complex refugee issues by examining them through the lens of ethnicity. Even though Fadiman’s book looks at life once the refugees have reached the country of asylum, the same paradigm of analysis can, and should, be applied to studies concerning refugees still in camps; however, this is a tall and complex order.\(^{15}\)

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\(^{13}\) Linda Hitchcox, *Vietnamese Refugees in Southeast Asian Camps* (New York: St. Martin’s Press. 1990), 214.


of ethnicities and even more subgroups, and many factors beyond ethnicity that influence their experiences.

The Montagnards are one ethnicity that has not been extensively studied in Southeast Asian refugee studies, and their story is different from other refugee groups. There are several possible reasons why the Montagnards have been left out of other histories.

Most histories have grouped the Montagnard story with that of Vietnamese or other Southeast Asian minorities. Often the terms hill-people or Central Highland tribes are used to group large numbers of minorities together. Moreover, the Montagnard story was not as high profile as other refugee stories. For example, there is a large scholarship network about the Vietnamese boat-people who fled from Vietnam between 1975 and the 1990s. Their story is not only compelling, but it is steeped in worldwide political strife and the boat-peoples’ situation was pivotal in shaping international refugee policy. While the Montagnard story is just as compelling, it did not initiate international debate.

Finally, the Montagnards reached the refugee camp in Thailand at the end of 1985, much later than the first thrust of refugees. The deluge of Southeast Asian refugees fleeing their home countries began ten years earlier, in 1975, with the fall of the South Vietnamese and Laotian governments. The refugee flow increased in 1976 when the Khmer Rouge took over in Cambodia. In many ways it seems as though the Montagnards got lost in the slew of refugees. This was dramatically indicated in 1986 when the CBS news show West 57th

interviewed Attorney General Edwin Meese’s wife, Ursula, and an envoy from the U.S. Embassy in Bangkok at the Site II refugee camp in Thailand where the Montagnards were living. No one from the embassy knew about the Montagnards being at the camp. CBS reporter Meredith Vieira bewildered Mrs. Meese and the Embassy entourage when she asked if they would be meeting with the Montagnards. Lacey Wright, a representative from the U.S. Embassy in Thailand, responded “no” because the group would only be at the camp for a limited time. Indeed, twenty minutes after Vieira posed the question, Mrs. Meese and several Embassy representatives made time to meet with the Montagnards; but, as Meredith Vieira stated, “with thousands of refugees to deal with, it’s easy to lose sight of 200.”

The Montagnards have not been omitted from all scholarship. A large number of military histories discuss the Montagnards’ military relationship with the United States during the Vietnam War and many anthropological studies examine the Montagnards’ ethnic backgrounds and culture.

Several books discuss the Montagnards’ participation in the Vietnam War. *The Barking Deer*, by Jonathan Rubin, *The B-52 Overture* and *Valley of Tears: Assault into Plei Trap*, by Don Bandell, and *The Devil’s Secret Name*, by Jim Morris are just a few examples of the many books that recount joint Montagnard and American operations. All are written by Special Forces members or authors closely associated with the military. These books are war stories, told by military men.

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Of this genre, *The Devil’s Secret Name* is the most relevant to this research. It is a compilation of wartime and post-war time stories, including Morris’s own personal experience with the Montagnards. In the last chapter, titled “The Montagnards,” Jim Morris describes how the group of 220 Montagnards reached the Site II refugee camp in Thailand, and he vaguely recounts why and how the U.S. government began to support their resettlement. Morris does not relate any governmental policies that may have been changed to allow for the Montagnards’ quick resettlement, he does not talk about their American education stint in the Philippines, and he does not mention Lutheran Family Services and the volunteers in North Carolina who worked to facilitate the resettlement.\(^{20}\)

Anthropological studies also discuss the Montagnards. One of the most significant is *We Have Eaten the Forest: The Story of a Montagnard Village in the Central Highlands of Vietnam* by George Condominas. Condominas lived among the Mpong Gar tribe, one of the several Montagnard tribes, from 1947-1950 and recorded village life, documenting religious ceremonies and rites. This book provides a magnificent ethnography of the Montagnard culture and way of life.\(^{21}\) Another anthropologist who has conducted in-depth, comprehensive, and profound studies of the Montagnards is Dr. Gerald Hickey. Hickey’s autobiography, *Window on a War: An Anthropologist in the Vietnam Conflict*, details his observations of the Vietnamese and the Montagnards between 1956-1973 and explains his suggestions to the U.S. government about how to win the support of the Vietnamese and Montagnard people in the war effort. Hickey expresses a lot of anger towards the U.S.

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government that, while interesting, may cloud his message.\textsuperscript{22} Other books by Hickey include *Mango Rain*, *Shattered World: Adaptations and Survival among Vietnam’s Highland Peoples during the Vietnam War*, and *Free in the Forest*.\textsuperscript{23} Hickey studies the Montagnards’ culture, how the Vietnam War upset or altered their culture, and what went wrong with U.S. policy during the Vietnam War.

These books by anthropologists who have studied the Montagnard people shed valuable light; however, they are not pivotal to this study because they do not focus on the resettlement or how that resettlement may have impacted the Montagnard culture.

Nor have the Montagnards been neglected by the media. *West 57\textsuperscript{th}* was the first television show to air a special on the Montagnards after they had been discovered in the Site II refugee camp. Producer Rob Hershman and reporter Meredith Vieira visited the camp with Don Scott, a former in-country chief for Project Concern, a non-denominational charity foundation that ran schools, hospitals, and various other projects in the Central Highlands.\textsuperscript{24} They produced a twelve minute piece that highlighted the Montagnards’ role in the Vietnam War, their subsequent battle against Vietnam, their struggles in the Cambodian jungle, their arrival to the Site II camp and their desire to relocate to the United States.\textsuperscript{25} In 1990 CBS produced *Vestige of Honor*, a highly sensationalized account of the Montagnard resettlement

\textsuperscript{24} *West 57\textsuperscript{th}* “The Montagnards – American Betrayal,” CBS News Archives (originally aired June 11, 1986); Jim Morris, *The Devil’s Secret Name*, 304, 315.
\textsuperscript{25} *West 57\textsuperscript{th}* “The Montagnards – American Betrayal,” CBS News Archives (originally aired June 11, 1986).
to the United States. The film is very loosely based on facts, it overstates the role of the Special Forces in the Montagnard resettlement, and it inaccurately exaggerates the animosity between those advocating for the Montagnard resettlement and the U.S. Embassy in Thailand. This film will not be used in this study because the facts and storyline are imprecise and embellished.26 Also, local newspapers and television news programs in Greensboro, Raleigh, and Charlotte documented the Montagnard resettlement process to North Carolina in great detail.

Several dissertations have addressed the Montagnards as well. The dissertation most similar to this research is Gary Andresen’s master’s thesis, “From Greenwood to Greensboro: Vietnam’s central highlanders and their migration to North Carolina.” Andresen focuses on the Rhade Montagnard tribe and examines how their history and culture influenced their migration to North Carolina. His work is very well researched and ingeniously shows how the Rhade’s tribal heritage, colonial past, ethnic tensions with the Vietnamese, and their cultural connection with the land of the Central Highlands affected their migration to a new homeland. Andersen examines anthropological studies and histories of the Montagnards prior to and during French colonization of Vietnam in order to analyze the Montagnards’ migration to the United States within the framework of their culture and history.27 Andersen does not investigate the steps of the Montagnards’ resettlement, analyze how the resettlement was initiated, or explain what groups facilitated the resettlement. Also, Andersen does not consider how the resettlement may be interpreted within the context of memory and memory

reconstruction. This study focuses on the groups of veterans, the Lutheran Family Services organization, and community volunteers who formed memory activist groups to selectively market the Montagnards as abandoned American soldiers in order to stimulate support for their resettlement. It attempts to show the Montagnard resettlement as a living memorial constructed in response to negative memories of the Vietnam War.

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This study examines the 1986 Montagnard resettlement process to Greensboro, NC and situates it within the process of the American public’s construction and revision of memories of the Vietnam War. It focuses on how the Montagnards were brought to the United States, the actions of Lutheran Family Services of North Carolina, and the experiences of the community volunteers. This is the first study devoted to the Montagnards’ resettlement process, and one of a handful of resettlement studies that focuses on the agencies and the volunteers.

Chapter One explains who the Montagnards are, their past affiliation with the U.S. military, and how the 220 Montagnards arrived at the Site II refugee camp where they made contact with sponsors in the United States. This chapter explains how the U.S. government became aware of the Montagnard refugees and how it expedited their resettlement process.

The second chapter examines the unique challenges of the Montagnard resettlement, the selection of Lutheran Family Services of North Carolina, and Lutheran Family Services’ preparations for the Montagnards’ arrival.

Chapter Three is about the volunteers and the community. It examines who the volunteers were, how and why they contributed, and how the community reacted to the
Montagnard resettlement. All the Montagnards who were resettled in Greensboro were sponsored by churches and there were more than fifty churches in Greensboro alone that participated in the resettlement. The commitment of each church and of the volunteers within the churches varied widely.\footnote{Rhonda Rosser, interview with Lauren Raper, Greensboro, NC, June 16, 2008; Cecilia Shankle interview.} What is constant are the needs of each refugee: all needed shelter, food, clothing, and basic assimilation education to function in the United States. While gauging the community’s reactions is difficult, this chapter will explore both the positive and negative reactions to the newcomers. The conclusion places the Montagnard story within the context of memory construction and the Vietnam War.

Much of the information in this study is based on interviews of former Lutheran Family Services staff and volunteers. This is due to the lack of primary documents and secondary literature about the Montagnard resettlement. For example, Fox News in Greensboro has video recordings of when the Montagnards arrived in Greensboro, but there is no audio or written transcript to accompany the video.\footnote{The author contacted Fox News, WGHP in Greensboro on February 16, 2009. The archivist found video recordings of the Montagnards’ arrival but explained that during the 1980s audio and video were recorded separately and Fox did not have the audio to accompany all of the video recordings.} The State Department has not released the resettlement plan that LFS devised for the Montagnards. Lutheran Family Services cannot release documents about the resettlement that may contain personal information due to the Health Insurance and Portability and Accountability Act.\footnote{The author contacted Lutheran Family Services of the Carolinas on September 1, 2008.} Moreover, many documents that were kept by individual Lutheran Family Services staff can no longer be located.
Clearly, interviewees might not remember events accurately and may be biased. All former Lutheran Family Services staff and community volunteers who were interviewed asserted that they had had very positive experiences working with the Montagnard resettlement. Several interviewees acknowledged that there were volunteers who had less positive experiences, but they were reluctant to provide their names or specific details. This may have skewed the conclusions of this essay.

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The focal point of this research is narrow. It zeros in on the 1986 Montagnard resettlement to Greensboro, NC, it studies only one voluntary agency, and it examines only a handful of the over fifty local churches that helped to facilitate the resettlement. This research is therefore just a beginning and its conclusions are tentative. It suggests that the Montagnard resettlement was unique because of the group’s past connections with the U.S. military. It finds that local resettlement agencies and volunteers played a critical role in helping the Montagnards establish successful lives in North Carolina. And, it argues that the efforts of veterans, the Lutheran Family Services organization and volunteers to facilitate the resettlement may be partially attributed to the desire to atone for and rectify negative memories of the war; and that the Montagnard resettlement may be understood as a living memorial to the Vietnam War.
Blest be the Ties that Bind: Friends Re-Unite

Christmas day, 1984. The hot and cold war between Vietnam and Cambodia is hot, and the Vietnamese dry season offensive is in full swing. ¹ As Vietnam brings destruction to Cambodia it inadvertently brings freedom to 209 Montagnards held captive by the Khmer Rouge. Escaping to the jungle and crossing into Thailand, these Montagnards end a two decade-long journey from war to peace and begin their journey to the United States.²

Who are the Montagnards?

Before explaining how the Montagnards became refugees and were resettled in the United States, it is necessary to understand who they are.

The Montagnards are the indigenous hill tribe peoples of Vietnam’s Central Highlands. Prior to French colonization in the late 1800s, the Central Highland tribes had no common name that distinguished them collectively from the Vietnamese. The approximately fifty Highland tribes began to use the term Montagnard as a collective identification in the 1940s when the tribes banded together to lobby the French, and later the United States, for an autonomous Montagnard state in the Central Highlands.³ According to the United Nations

² Jim Morris, The Devil’s Secret Name: True Stories from the Front Lines (New York: St. Martin’s, 1990), 303.
High Commissioner of Refugees, there are slightly more than one million Montagnards residing in small villages throughout the Central Highlands of Vietnam today.⁴

![Figure 1: These maps show the location of the Central Highlands within Vietnam and Cambodia. The extreme lower portions of Laos are also understood to be part of the Central Highlands.](image)

The term Montagnard reflects colonial oppression. Historian George Stocking explains that the Vietnamese referred to the Montagnards as “Moi,” a term meaning savage. After World War II, French officer Léopold Sabatier coined the term Montagnard, meaning

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“mountain people,” a non-derogatory term which the French adopted to replace “Moi.” It is telling that the Montagnards are known by a French instead of a native name. In fact, once the Montagnards reached North Carolina in 1986, they adopted the native name Dega or Degar instead of Montagnard.  

6 Stocking, Colonial Situations, 244.  
The Montagnards are distinct from the Vietnamese in physique, culture, ancestry, history, religion, and language. While Montagnards and Vietnamese have very similar statures, Montagnards have a darker complexion and do not have epicanthic folds around

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their eyes. There is a long history of tension and warfare between the Montagnards and the Vietnamese. Even though there are instances of intermarriage and cooperation, Montagnards have fought for centuries for an autonomous Central Highland nation apart from Vietnam.\(^9\)

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**Figure 3:** This was the cover of the April 1968 *National Geographic*. This was one of the first images that introduced the Montagnards to the people in the United States.

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\(^10\) *National Geographic* 133, no. 4 (April 1968).
Before Christianity was introduced to the Central Highlands most Montagnards were animists. In the late 1800s, French Catholic missionaries began establishing missions throughout the Central Highlands and many Montagnards converted to Catholicism. In the early 1900s, Protestant missionaries entered the Central Highlands, translating the *Bible* into native Montagnard languages.\(^\text{11}\) While religious beliefs vary among the Montagnards, Protestant Christianity is the predominate religion.\(^\text{12}\) The Human Rights Watch Organization estimates that in 1975 there were approximately 229,000 Montagnard Protestant Christians. In the early 1980s, the Vietnamese government released a number of Protestant pastors from re-education camps and the numbers of Christian converts escalated dramatically. By 2000 there were approximately 400,000.\(^\text{13}\) The Vietnamese government viewed the growth of Christianity in the Central Highlands as a political threat and took actions to suppress it.\(^\text{14}\) Persecution of the Montagnards by the Vietnamese government because of their Christian beliefs, both Catholic and Protestant, is well documented. The United States Congress has held numerous hearings specifically addressing the persecution of Montagnard Christians in Vietnam.\(^\text{15}\)

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\(^\text{12}\) Michaud and Ovesen, *Turbulent Times and Enduring Peoples*, 140. Much has been written about how the Montagnards’ religious beliefs have been shaped by colonial subjugation. For further information see: Timothy Fitzgerald, *Religion and the Secular: Historical and Colonial Formations* (London: Equinox Publishers, 2007); Ken Kamp and Don McCaskill, *Development or Domestication?: indigenous peoples of Southeast Asia* (Chiang Mai: Silk Worm Books, 1997). Besides Christianity, Animism and Buddhism have large Montagnard followings.

\(^\text{13}\) Human Rights Watch, *Repression of Montagnards*, 59-65. There are no exact estimates of how large the Montagnard Christian community was during the 1980s. This may be attributed to efforts by the Vietnamese government to suppress information about Christianity within Vietnam.

\(^\text{14}\) Ibid., 64-65.

During the American Vietnam War, the Central Highlands and the Montagnards were the first line of defense against northern Communists invading the South via the Ho Chi Minh trail. From 1961 to 1975, U.S Special Forces worked and lived with the Montagnards, organizing small cadres to engage the North Vietnamese and to guide American military units through the jungles. The Americans and the Montagnards forged strong bonds and there are many accounts told by former Special Forces of the Montagnards’ intense loyalty and bravery. These bonds did not end when the Americans left Vietnam. As former Army Specialist Mike Little explained through teary eyes, “[t]he effect they had on me in those few years I will never forget…Not a day goes by that I don't think of them, especially the children.”

The Vietnam War placed the Montagnards in a precarious position. Even though the U.S. government never explicitly promised the Montagnards an autonomous homeland, many Montagnards allied with the United States believing a U.S. victory was their best opportunity for achieving a Montagnard state. Several supported the South Vietnamese government, hoping that if it won the war it would grant them a state. Montagnards served in the South Vietnamese government as regional Ministers and Montagnard representatives. But in 1964, frustrated by the repressive and discriminatory policies of the South Vietnamese government, a small group of Montagnards organized FULRO (French acronym meaning

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Front Unifié de Lutte des Races Opprimées), a Montagnard autonomy movement that fought with the U.S. military while lobbying the South Vietnamese government for Montagnard rights. In general, the U.S. government did not interfere with FULRO, only warning the group that its actions should not be “disloyal” to the United States.  

It is impossible to estimate how many Montagnards fought for the United States during the war.  

Figure 4: This picture shows a member of the 8th Psyops Battalion in the Central Highlands of Vietnam with members of the Montagnard loudspeaker team. Teams such as this one were meant to recruit other Montagnards to join the U.S. Special Forces operations.

**FULRO and the Post Vietnam War**

After South Vietnam fell to the North Vietnamese in 1975, a small contingent of Montagnards affiliated with FULRO continued to fight Vietnam for Montagnard autonomy. FULRO’s loosely organized military forces operated in small units throughout the Highlands attacking Vietnamese villages. By the early 1980s, FULRO forces numbered approximately 7,000 Montagnard men, women, and adolescents.\(^\text{22}\) FULRO’s ongoing strikes against Vietnam led to some dangerous alliances. According to Ieng Sary, Khmer Rouge Minister of Foreign Affairs, in 1977 “FULRO approached us [the Khmer Rouge] for cooperation to exchange intelligence, military experience and [to] get guerilla warfare training.”\(^\text{23}\) This uneasy alliance between the Montagnards and the brutal Khmer Rouge, the full extent of which is not known, provided FULRO with weapons, but at a high cost.\(^\text{24}\) By the early 1980s, with outdated weapons, very short supplies, dwindling numbers, a souring relationship with the Khmer Rouge, and no hope of U.S. aid, a large portion of FULRO’s forces (approximately 4,000) laid down their weapons and began to journey to Thailand, where they hoped to make contact with the United States and ask for asylum.\(^\text{25}\)

\(^{22}\) Human Rights Watch, *Repression of Montagnards*, 26-27. It is difficult to give an accurate account of FULRO forces. Many fighters lived in the jungles, but others lived in Montagnard villages within Vietnam and fought “part-time” with FULRO. Many FULRO operatives had families who lived in Vietnamese villages and their families would provide FULRO with food and supplies.


\(^{25}\) Johnson, “Montagnards to settle here,” *Greensboro News & Record*, July 27, 1986. As explained above many FULRO operatives had families living in Vietnam. When the group of 4,000 left for Thailand most men left their families behind. 4,000 is an estimation that varies greatly among sources. In “The Montagnards – American Betrayal” the number is estimated to be 2,000.
They knew this trek would be no walk in the park. The path was the jungle. They would have to avoid or fight Vietnamese and Khmer Rouge enemies. Food would be foraged roots or bugs or raw animals, because cooking fires would alert enemies of their position. Most women and children would have to be left behind in Vietnam because they would slow the pace and crying babies would expose their location. Weather, wild animals, and poisonous snakes and insects posed as large a threat as enemy armies. Dock R’mah, one of the Montagnard leaders, recalled afterwards, “[w]e lived like animals.”

But they believed their lives depended on it.

In 1982, a small group of approximately 220 of the original 4,000 FULRO Montagnards were captured by the Khmer Rouge and imprisoned in Dang Rak, a Cambodian labor camp just miles from the Thai border. Oddly, their liberators would be their life-long enemies, the Vietnamese. In December 1984, the Vietnamese offensive lunged further into Cambodia providing the group with the perfect opportunity to escape. The Montagnards fled to the Nam Yun refugee camp located on the northern Thai-Cambodia border. In October 1985, approximately 209 Montagnards were relocated to the Site II refugee camp,

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27 Evan Gottesman, Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge: the politics of nation building (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 223; Thomas Walkhom, “Tribesmen worn out after 11 futile years fighting Communists,” The Globe and Mail, March 18, 1986; Morris, The Devil’s Secret Name, 303; “Vietnamese attacks in Cambodia,” US Department of State Bulletin, February 1985. The State Department Bulletin states that the Vietnamese targeted camps along the Cambodian/Thailand border that were specifically associated with the noncommunist Khmer People’s National Liberation Front.
29 Nam Yun was overseen by the Khmer People’s National Liberation Front, a non-Communist, pro-Western, anti-Vietnamese, and anti-Khmer Rough political party. Nam Yun was one of seventeen refugee camps on the border of Cambodia and Thailand.
located a few kilometers north of Aranyaprathet, Thailand. This was the first large group of Montagnards who had fought with the U.S. military to seek asylum in Thailand.\textsuperscript{30}

At Site II, the Montagnards joined the thousands of other refugees strewn throughout Thailand who had fled their homelands and were living the precarious, homeless, and nationless life of a refugee.\textsuperscript{31} But Montagnards were unusual refugees. Their resettlement story shows how military and political affiliations can affect refugees’ experiences, and it provides insight into the relationship between the United States and its war allies.


Figure 5: This map shows the distance between Vietnam and Thailand and gives a sense of how far the Montagnards had to travel to reach the Site II refugee camp, located about thirty miles North of Aranyaprathet, Thailand.

Broken Promises

The Montagnards’ journey to the United States begins at the end of the Vietnam War. U.S. Forces evacuated fewer than thirty-six Montagnards in the turbulent days following the North’s invasion of the South. Some U.S. personnel, however, argue that unlike the thousands of erstwhile U.S. allies who were stranded in Vietnam, the majority of Montagnards remained in Vietnam after 1975 because the U.S. military had led them to believe it would provide them with military assistance if they continued to fight Vietnamese Communists after the United States left.  

On April 4, 1975, in the U.S. Embassy in Saigon, Special Assistant to the Ambassador, George Jacobson, Edmund Sprague, Edmund Sprague, a Foreign Service Officer assigned to the Central Highlands as the Ethnic Minority Advisor and the Province Senior Advisor of Phu Bon Province, and several South Vietnamese Montagnard officials attended a meeting that addressed the future of the Montagnards in Vietnam. According to Sprague, Minister Nay Luett opened the meeting with an appeal for his people [the Montagnards], and asked for U.S. support so they could continue resisting the North Vietnamese until the South Vietnamese could regroup and prepare for the return of the U.S. Toneh Han To, Assistant to Nay Luett, briefed [the group] on Montagnard and American friendship. He stated that you [the U.S.] are our friends, we are your friends. We believe in you and need your protection. It is your [the U.S.] duty. Thousands will die immediately if the North Vietnamese take

33 West 57th, “The Montagnards – American Betrayal,” CBS News Archives (originally aired June 11, 1986). Sprague’s argument is supported by former Green Beret, Jim Morris, and former charity worker Don Scott in the CBS documentary.
over. If no U.S. support for Montagnard resistance is approved we need political asylum. Mr. Jacobson briefed [the group] that U.S. priority at this time was to evacuate Vietnamese who are classified as Political Refugees. I [Sprague] cannot remember Jacobson’s last words, but in good old State Department jargon he made them think they should continue their resistance. Mr. Luett and his staff firmly believed that the U.S. would aid Montagnard resistance.

According to Jim Morris, a retired Green Beret and military journalist, who has examined the original transcript of this meeting, has spoken with Edmund Sprague, and has spoken with Pierre-Marie K’briuh (a Montagnard who was the Secretary General of the Ministry of Ethnic Minorities and present at the meeting), Nay Luett proposed either a Montagnard resistance movement or for Montagnard forces to move towards Saigon for the last-ditch defense of the city. K’briuh told Morris that “unequivocally a [U.S. supported] Montagnard resistance was established at that meeting.” Furthermore, Morris points out that

There are no quotes for G.D. Jacobson, the American who chaired the meeting, a curious omission in view of the gravity of the situation, but this sentence does appear: “Mr. Jacobson said that all our information indicated that the GVN intended to defend Saigon and he was confident they would consolidate their forces to do so.”

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35 Sprague personal statement.
36 The author was not able to obtain an exact transcript of this meeting.
38 Morris, The Devil’s Secret Name, 316-317.
Initially Sprague “thought the U.S. would support the Montagnard resistance.” But after he returned to the Central Intelligence Agency in 1976, Director William Colby told him that “there would be no support.” Sprague states that the State Department “dazzled [the Montagnards] with footwork. The ‘Yards’ (slang for Montagnard) left with the impression that certain promises had been made. But they weren’t really. They were flimflammed.” While Sprague and others recognize that the United States did not make explicit promises to the Montagnards, they charge that the U.S. military and government knowingly misled its allies and left them in a dangerous and precarious situation.

In 1985, there would be another, less risky, chance help the Montagnards. Their friends in the United States were ready to fight to redeem the broken promises of 1975.

Reconnecting with the United States

It started with a strange phone call to Don Scott in Maine. During the 1960s, Scott had been the in-country chief of Project Concern, a civilian nondenominational charitable foundation that ran a hospital in Tuyen Duc province, in addition to well-digging projects and schools throughout the Central Highlands. Scott had worked closely with Montagnard villagers, forging relationships with the communities, not just the fighting forces. In December 1985, Scott received a phone call from a Montagnard living in San Francisco who had received a letter from Thaniel Ha Doi Ksa, Scott’s friend and interpreter during the war.

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39 Sprague personal statement.
40 Edmund Sprague quoted in Morris, *The Devil’s Secret Name* 316-317.
41 *West 57th*, “The Montagnards – American Betrayal,” CBS News Archives (originally aired June 11, 1986); Morris, *The Devil’s Secret Name* 306. After reviewing the record of the 1975 meeting in Saigon, Morris conveys that the wording was imprecise and “there was nothing we [the men working to resettle the Montagnards in the U.S.] use to prove the U.S. had [knowingly] reneged on an agreement.”
42 Morris, *The Devil’s Secret Name*, 304.
Thaniel had asked him to find Scott and tell him that the Montagnards were in Thailand. Scott was flabbergasted; he immediately planned a trip to Thailand and began feverishly calling old Special Forces friends and politicians to try to gather information about them.  

In late December 1985, Scott, his fourteen year old son Bryn, Ha Kin Lienghot (a Montagnard living in the United States) and Hugh Brown (a *Time-Life* photographer and Vietnam veteran) boarded a plane to Thailand. After visiting the Montagnards at Site II, Scott called the U.S. Embassy in Bangkok to gather information about their refugee status. Surprisingly, when Scott called the Embassy he was able to speak directly with the Deputy Chief of Mission, Charles Freeman. According to Scott, Freeman informed him that the war had been over for ten years. If the Montagnards fit into a priority, they’d probably be at the bottom of the list as far as the U.S. Embassy was concerned. But he didn’t really think they were on that list.

Curiously in an article on January 20, 1986, *New York Times* journalist Barbara Crossett reported that by the following week a “team of Americans will begin interviewing [the Montagnards at Site II] to determine who is eligible for American residence.” This indicates that the Montagnards were indeed on a “refugee list.” Crossett added that while at Site II “[r]efugee officials will also interview the nearly 5,000 Vietnamese at the camp.”

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45 Don Scott quoted in West 57th, “The Montagnards – American Betrayal,” CBS News Archives (originally aired June 11, 1986). This is the same Charles Freeman who just withdrew his nomination to become the chair of the National Security Council in the Barack Obama administration.
Apparently the Montagnards were not distinguished as special or advantaged refugees because of their past association with the U.S. military.

Scott was infuriated by Freeman’s response. He feared that the opportunity to rectify the damage done in 1975 was being squandered, and his anger was directed at the fact that the Montagnards were not given special refugee status. Scott stated that “anybody that walks in there [Site II], any American that walks in there, should walk in there with a guilty conscience because these are people that we should have taken care of and we didn’t, and we should make every effort in the world to take care of them now.” Scott thought that the United States should grant the entire group priority status. Scott contacted his friend and former Green Beret, Jim Morris, and together they made it their personal mission to quickly get the Montagnards resettled in the United States.46

In late November 1985 Scott returned to Brunswick, Maine to begin the campaign to bring all of the Montagnards in Thailand to the United States. He personally contacted Senator William Cohen (R-ME) for help, as well as Montagnards in the United States, journalists, veterans, former government employees, and civilians he thought might be interested in the cause.47


from Vietnam, through Cambodia and into Thailand. It is difficult to gauge Scott’s role in the newspaper campaign. It is unclear if he personally contacted journalists and editors, or if people Scott had recruited to help the Montagnards contacted the newspapers. What is clear is that all of the articles echoed Scott’s argument that the Montagnards deserved the United States’ help because of their service with the U.S. military during the Vietnam War. One of the earliest articles, “…But Montagnards Still Wait in a Thai Camp,” by Barbara Crossette, explained how the Montagnards had cast “their lot in the early 1960s with the Americans and against Communism in Indochina. When the Americans left, they went on fighting.” Without hope of continuing their struggle, “they are asking the United States to extend a hand to old comrades and give them homes.” Crossette called the Montagnards, “‘our Yards,’” referring to the military term for Montagnard.

Early in 1986, after reading an article in the New York Times about the Montagnards, a CBS executive from West 57th contacted Jim Morris about doing a documentary about them. Morris gave the executive Scott’s contact information and within a week, CBS producer Robert Hershman had struck a deal with Scott to document the Montagnards in the refugee camp.


50 Ibid.; Morris, The Devil’s Secret Name, 304, 306.
Scott returned to Thailand with CBS in March 1986 to film “The Montagnards – American Betrayal.”\(^{51}\) Reporter Meredith Vieira introduced the Montagnards as refugees “with a very special claim on the conscience of America,” because they were the United States’ “earliest and most loyal allies during [the Vietnam] war.” Vieira interviewed Don Scott, Jim Morris, and Edmund Sprague, all of whom vociferously explained that the Montagnards had been recruited and trained by the U.S. Special Forces and had sacrificed their own lives to protect Americans. The documentary charged the U.S. government with betraying the Montagnards in 1975 and again in 1986 by leaving them to languish in a refugee camp with no American aid.

While the filming was proceeding, Ursula Meese, wife of Attorney General Edwin Meese who oversaw refugee policy, and several representatives from the U.S. Embassy in Thailand visited the camp. Vieira approached Meese and asked her if she would be speaking with the Montagnards. Meese was clearly bewildered. Vieira asked Lacey Wright, the U.S. embassy in Bangkok’s Councilor for Refugees and Meese’s Embassy escort, if Ms. Meese would be meeting with the Montagnards and he responded, no, that she was there only for a short time. After twenty minutes Wright changed his mind: Ms. Meese would be meeting with the Montagnards because he had “taken their [CBS’s] advice and changed her schedule.”\(^{52}\) Wright explained, “We process a lot of different kinds of refugees. We have Vietnamese, hill-tribe people from Laos, low-land Lao, Khmer and so we can’t do everything at once.”\(^{53}\) The CBS segment highlighted the dichotomy: Vieira, Scott, Morris and Sprague

\(^{51}\) The show aired on June 11, 1986
\(^{53}\) Ibid.
described the Montagnards as the most loyal self-sacrificing American allies but, to the embassy, they were just one of many groups of refugees requesting American help.

It is impossible to gauge to what extent the television show influenced the State Department; but in March, several days after CBS filmed the uncomfortable visit of Mrs. Meese and embassy officials with the Montagnards, Scott was called to the U.S. embassy in Bangkok where he was told by embassy officials that “the Montagnards are now a senior priority.” Embassy officials denied that CBS’s presence had influenced their decision to make the Montagnards a priority, but it seems highly probable that their sudden interest in the Montagnards was spurred in part by the CBS report as well as by Scott’s campaign in the United States.  

Scott’s campaign lasted approximately twelve months, from November 1985 to November 1986 when the Montagnards were finally resettled in North Carolina. Scott is credited by many sources as being the catalyst behind the Montagnard resettlement. Michael Gross, the actor who plays Don Scott in “Vestige of Honor,” a December 1990 movie sensationalizing his efforts to get the Montagnards resettled to the United States, describes Scott as “a man of action. Scott’s way is just to wear people down. People keep turning him down and he tries another way.” Celia Shankle, the housing coordinator for Lutheran Family Services, agrees with this description, stating that making contact with the

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54 Ibid. The Embassy official who met with Scott is not named in the documentary or any other documents.
Montagnards, lobbying the State Department, mobilizing the media campaign, and spearheading the resettlement, “that was all Don Scott.”

Marketing the Montagnards and Garnering American Support

Scott marketed the Montagnards to the various media outlets and the State Department as steadfast and courageous war heroes. He stressed that they had been American soldiers, and he distinguished them from other Vietnamese refugees seeking asylum in the United States. Depicting the Montagnards as loyal American war heroes helped to set them apart as refugees who deserved special resettlement consideration. Scott was not the only one who took this approach. Rhonda Rosser, a Lutheran Family Services volunteer coordinator in charge of recruiting volunteers for the Montagnard resettlement, stated that she would intentionally focus on the Montagnards’ military service, loyalty, and sacrifice when recruiting volunteers in order to appeal to people’s patriotic side. In her view, people were more likely to volunteer to help the Montagnards if they saw them as a people who had sacrificed for Americans.

The CBS documentary used wartime footage to explain how Montagnards would protect American soldiers. Newspapers retold veterans’ personal stories of being saved by Montagnards. Jim Morris said that “if we'd been ambushed, [the Montagnards would] pass me to get at the ambush, to save my life.” Moreover, if a “Montagnard and an American patrol would take fire, the Montagnards would cluster around to shield the Americans with

58 Rhonda Rosser, interview by Lauren Raper, Greensboro, NC, June 18, 2008. As will be discussed in Chapter 2, only about 30 of the 209 Montagnards had fought with the United States during the Vietnam War. This did not affect Scott’s campaign; he believed all of the 209 deserved to be resettled in the United States.
their bodies. That was not an uncommon experience.” Veteran John Amundson added that “as far as I'm concerned, these people are POWs.” The soldiers’ voices were powerful. They attributed their survival to the Montagnards and begged the question; “if [the Montagnards] sacrificed their lives to help us live, what can we do to help them live?”

Inherent in their stories is a call for action based on patriotism. The Montagnards gave their lives to support the American cause; now it was America’s turn to support them.

The argument that the U.S. government had abandoned the Montagnards was another key aspect of the marketing campaign. News articles introduced the Montagnard story by recalling how they had been left behind by the Americans. The American soldiers who had been fighting communism and standing up for democratic ideals had fled, leaving the Montagnards to continue the fight alone. The U.S. government and military were indicted for abandoning allies and ideals. In a March 1986 article, journalist Thomas Walkom explained how the Montagnards had “refused to accept Communist victory in Vietnam” and had been abandoned and betrayed in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. Other articles indicted the American government and military for abandoning “their former patrons” and leaving the Montagnards “to struggle against the Vietnamese communists alone.” This theme is most blatant in the CBS documentary titled not surprisingly, “The Montagnards—American Betrayal.” In it, Ed Sprague, Jim Morris and Don Scott charge that the U.S.

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government promised to help the Montagnards continue fighting the North Vietnamese and to evacuate them if the North began to overrun the South, but it reneged at the last minute leaving the Montagnards to face persecution by the North Vietnamese.

Scott’s media campaign educated the American people by repeating that the Montagnards were “men who fought alongside American forces against communist forces during the Vietnam War.” Most Americans, familiar with other allies in the war, had never heard about the Montagnards because their numbers were small and because their connection with the Special Forces had been covert. The campaign created a sense of responsibility: Because the Montagnards had helped the United States, the United Stated should help them.

The Montagnards were one of many groups that had helped the United States during the war, but the media campaign directed concentrated attention on them by emphasizing their close, self-sacrificing relationship with the U.S. Special Forces. According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioners for Refugees (UNHCR), the deluge of Indochinese refugees during the 1980s had diluted the United States’ commitment to resettlement. By emphasizing their close relationship with the U.S. Special Forces, the media campaign delineated the Montagnards as special refugees, they were not just fleeing a war zone; they were whom the United States had recruited, trained, used, and abandoned.

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In May 1986, approximately six months after Scott began the campaign to get the Montagnards resettled in the United States, the State Department granted all 209

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Montagnards at the Site II camp first priority refugee status. The United States accepts refugees for resettlement on the basis of five processing priorities. First priority status is applied to individuals who are “facing compelling security concerns in the first country of asylum; in danger of [expulsion from countries of first asylum]; in danger of armed attack or physical violence; facing persecution as a result of political, religious, or human rights activities; women at risk; victims of torture or violence; physically or mentally disabled; in need of urgent medical care that could not be given in the country of asylum; and those individuals who do not have any other feasible ‘durable solution’ options.” Receiving first priority status placed the Montagnards at the top of the United States refugee resettlement list.

Unfortunately there have not been many details released about how the State Department made the decision to allow the Montagnards to resettle in the United States. But in August 1986, after they had been approved for resettlement, U.S. Refugee Coordinator Doug Ramsey explained that the Montagnards “high priority” status was due to their “special relationship” with the United States. In a statement to United Press International on November 21, 1986, less than a week before the Montagnards arrived in Greensboro, State Department press officer Pete Martinez stated that the Montagnards “are of special interest to

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66 U.S. Committee for Refugees, “Description of U.S. Refugee Processing Priorities,” Refugee Reports 20, no.12 (1999). The first and second resettlement priorities are applied to refugees with the most urgent needs for resettlement. The third, fourth, and fifth priorities are applied to family members of non-citizens legally present in the United States.

many Americans because of their close association with U.S. forces and American private
groups during the Vietnam War.”

It may be surmised that Don Scott’s high-profile media campaign, which characterized the Montagnards as loyal, self-sacrificing, and unjustly abandoned war allies, created the heightened interest in the Montagnard story which placed pressure on the State Department to grant them priority resettlement status. This is an example of how civilians, not governments or international organizations, are able to influence international refugee policy.

“A Home Away from Home”

The May 1986 State Department decision allowing the 209 Montagnards at the Site II Thai refugee camp to resettle in the United States was only the first small step of a long and difficult process. How would these 209 refugees, many of whom had been living the past ten years fighting a guerilla war in the jungle, and all of whom spoke limited English, were unfamiliar with indoor lighting or plumbing, and had never driven a car, settle into the suburbs of the United States?

Once the State Department has decided to admit refugees into the country, its role is largely over. The Department’s Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration contracts with national, private voluntary agencies (Volags) to provide refugees with housing, food, clothing, and cultural orientation counseling. The Volags are supported in part by the State Department and in part by grants and their own fundraising. In turn, these national Volags depend on a network of affiliate refugee resettlement agencies in various U.S. cities to

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perform the “on the ground” resettlement. Neither the State Department nor the Volags closely monitor the resettlement process or the disbursement of funds.³

Records concerning the funding and resettlement plans for individual refugee resettlements are very scarce; in some cases the State Department has not declassified the records, local resettlement agencies have disbanded, or records have been lost. Also, the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) prohibits resettlement agencies from releasing documents that may contain private information about the refugees.⁴ Consequently, this research relies largely on the national and local press as well as extensive interviews with participants to explain the unique challenges of the Montagnard resettlement.

In May 1986, the State Department granted the Montagnard resettlement contract to the national Volag, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services, located in Baltimore, Maryland, which, in turn selected its subsidiary group, Lutheran Family Services of Greensboro, North Carolina (LFS) to coordinate the local resettlement strategy.⁵⁶ After passing the assignment to LFS, the national organization, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services, served as the liaison between LFS and the State Department. This chapter explores in what ways the Montagnard resettlement was atypical, why LFS was chosen to facilitate

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⁴ The State Department has not released the resettlement plan composed by LFS. Upon contacting the LFS offices, the author was informed that no information concerning the Montagnard resettlement which may contain personal information could be released due to HIPAA.
the resettlement, and how LFS prepared for the resettlement. The actions of the volunteers and the reactions of the community are addressed in the subsequent chapter.

**Special People, Special Resettlement**

The Montagnard resettlement of 159 men, seventeen women, and thirty-three children was unusual for four reasons. First, the Montagnards’ past affiliation with the U.S. military gave them personal ties to the United States. As previously examined, the national media, especially the CBS report “The Montagnards – American Betrayal,” emphasized the Montagnards’ connection with the U.S. military, portraying them as abandoned American soldiers. This media campaign seems to have built support among the American public for the Montagnards. Charlotte, N.C. journalist Kays Gary reported in August 1986 that the CBS show “brought an overwhelming response nationally from viewers wanting to help” the Montagnards.

State Department representative Frank Sieverts explained in November 1986 that “Once it was established who they were, there was immediately a lot of interest in them.” The heightened interest in the Montagnard story placed pressure on the State Department and the resettlement agencies to succeed and succeed quickly.

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Second, Montagnard officials in the Thai refugee camp insisted that “either we all go or none of us goes;” demanding that all Montagnards in Site II be relocated at the same time.\footnote{Dock R’mah and Thaniel Ha Doi Ksa, interview by Lauren Raper, Greensboro, NC, September 9, 2008; Frank Gibney, “A welcome delayed,” Newsweek, March 31, 1986.} However, this posed a problem for the State Department because not all Montagnards had been affiliated with the United States: children, adolescents and women had never fought with the U.S. Special Forces.\footnote{Barbara Crossette, “…But Montagnards still wait in a Thai camp,” The New York Times, January 20, 1986; Gibney, “A welcome delayed,” Newsweek, March 31, 1986.} The Montagnards themselves estimated that only “about 30 of their number at the camp have the strongest cases” to qualify for immediate “American refugee status” based on their military service.\footnote{Crossette, “…But Montagnards still wait in a Thai camp,” The New York Times, January 20, 1986.}

Third, some Montagnards had formed an alliance with the ruthless Cambodian dictatorship, the Khmer Rouge after the Vietnam War. According to the Refugee Act of 1980 (INA), any person who participated in the persecution of another is excluded from being considered a refugee.\footnote{The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1980, Public Law 96-212, 96th Cong., 2d sess. (March 17, 1980); Andorra Bruno and Katherine Bush, “Congressional Research Service Report for Congress: Refugee Admissions and Resettlement Policy,” The Library of Congress, January 22, 2002, \url{http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/8047.pdf} (accessed March 1, 2009).} Not only did many of the Montagnard refugees fight with the Khmer Rouge against the Vietnamese Communists after 1975, but they had participated in attacks against Vietnamese settlements in the Central Highlands. This compromised their refugee status. The Montagnards knew that their alliance with the Khmer Rouge was controversial. In March 1986, Y-Tlur Eban, a former combat interpreter for the Green Berets, justified the alliance by explaining to Newsweek reporter Frank Gibney, Jr. that
“[t]here are only 190 [of us living in the jungle, fighting the Vietnamese]. We cannot fight the Vietnamese alone.”15

At least some diplomats agreed. In July 1982, a Western diplomat acknowledged the Montagnard attacks in the Vietnam Central Highlands and conceded that “the groups’ source of weapons was undoubtedly the Khmer Rouge.” But the diplomat described the attacks as “an interesting political phenomenon” instead of a major threat to the region because the Montagnards’ “goal was not ideological, but aimed at autonomy for Montagnard ethnic minorities – a goal going back to the time of French colonial occupation.”16 In August 1986, shortly after the Montagnard group was approved for resettlement, an American official stated that they had never been “more than an irritant to the Vietnamese.”17

Sheppie Abramowitz, a project officer for the Bureau of Refugee Programs at the State Department, acknowledged in 1986 that most of the 209 Montagnards being resettled in the United States had “continued fighting the Communists in the Cambodian resistance since the Communist takeover of South Vietnam in 1975,” and State Department press officer Pete Martinez described the Montagnards as “a staunchly independent people.” Neither Abramowitz nor Martinez addressed how the Montagnards’ alliance with the Khmer Rouge or their attacks on

15 Gibney, “A welcome delayed,” Newsweek, March 31, 1986. Gibney refers to Y-Tlur Eban as Thoraban. Thoraban was the name that Y-Tlur adopted during the Vietnam War because it was easier for Americans to pronounce. Y-Tlur’s reference to 190 Montagnards fighting with the Khmer Rouge refers to small FULRO unit. As previously explained, in 1980 there were approximately 7,000 FULRO fighters organized in small units throughout the Vietnam and Cambodian Central Highlands. The group of 209 Montagnards at the Site II camp was associated with FULRO; however, not all of them were full time fighters. His reference to 190 may be considered as an estimation of how many full-time fighters this small group had deployed at all times.
Vietnam compromised their refugee status.\textsuperscript{18} It seems that the U.S. government overlooked or downplayed the Montagnards’ association with the Khmer Rouge and their clandestine attacks on Vietnam.

Also, in some newspaper and media accounts of the Montagnard resettlement there is a subtle contention that that the Montagnards had continued to sacrifice for freedom and democracy, ideals the United States forfeited when it had left Vietnam in 1975.\textsuperscript{19} One example explained that “When the Americans left, [the Montagnards] went on fighting” for the cause of independence. The press reports stressed that the Montagnards were abandoned, betrayed, and orphaned by the U.S. government and military.\textsuperscript{20}

Finally, Montagnard officials insisted that all Montagnards be relocated as a group in the same place. Sheppie Abramowitz explained, the “request for so large a group to be resettled together was unusual.”\textsuperscript{21} Judy Goyer, director of the Refugee Assistance Program for LFS, conceded that the Montagnards’ resettlement as a group was considered “highly unusual.”\textsuperscript{22} Traditionally, the State Department had tried to disperse refugees across the United States. As a 1975 study by Reginald Baker and David North explained, the majority of “1975 [Indochinese] refugees [were] scattered widely throughout the 50 states, [and] they

were sprinkled in fairly small groupings within those states.”

This helped minimize competition for local jobs, spread the burden on communities, and maximize governmental resources. But by the mid-1980s, the State Department had learned that the dispersal method of resettlement was flawed. No matter where they had initially been placed, Indochinese refugees moved in large numbers to the U.S. south and west, and especially to California to be closer to other Indochinese refugees and in a warmer climate. Therefore, by the early 1980s, the State Department began experimenting with cluster resettlements, keeping refugees together so they could support each other and form cultural and communal organizations. The Montagnards were benefactors of this experiment, but cluster resettlements were still rare. The State Department has no public statistics concerning the number and success rates of cluster resettlements, but it strictly limits the communities approved for cluster resettlement to those that can absorb new populations with few economic and public backlashes.

26 Baker and North, *The 1975 Refugees: Their first five years in America*, 57-60; Bailey, interview, May 27, 2008.
The Montagnards in Thailand were adamant that they remain as a group, and the State Department complied. Abramovitz stated that “they’ve been together, they wanted to stay together, and [the State Department] decided to honor that.” All 209 were relocated to North Carolina, under the watch of LFS, headquartered in Greensboro, N.C. According to Raleigh Bailey, the former director of LFS in Greensboro, his office decided to split the Montagnards into three groups, and settle them in the state’s three largest cities to make the resettlement easier. The Montagnards were divided along tribal lines with: approximately 100 Rhade settling in Greensboro, between 50 and 70 Jarai in Raleigh, and the remaining

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Bahar in Charlotte.\textsuperscript{30} LFS contracted the resettlement duties in Raleigh to the local LFS group and in Charlotte to Catholic Social Services. There was very little collaboration among the three organizations and LFS allowed the agencies in Raleigh and Charlotte to independently organize their own resettlement plans.\textsuperscript{31}

\textit{You’re it!}

On November 24, 1986, Terry Rusch, the State Department official in charge of the resettlement in North Carolina, stated that the “Department regards the Lutheran host agencies in North Carolina as particularly well suited to oversee the resettlement.”\textsuperscript{32} LFS was chosen to facilitate the resettlement for a variety of reasons, including its resettlement model, its past resettlement successes, its close relationship with the community, its location in North Carolina, a region that boasted diversity, jobs, and proximity to the Special Forces. The decision to choose LFS was not unopposed; the Massachusetts governor’s office fiercely lobbied the State Department to give the Montagnard contract to a Massachusetts resettlement agency. But before examining why LFS was chosen to host the Montagnards, it is first necessary to understand the background and structure of LFS.

The North Carolina arm of Lutheran Family Services was commissioned in 1976 to provide family counseling, children’s residential and foster care, and refugee and immigration services. Director Bill D. Brittain established the first headquarters in the

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\item \textsuperscript{30} Celia Shankle, interview by Lauren Raper, Greensboro, N.C., August 19, 2008.
\item \textsuperscript{31} Bailey, interview, May 27, 2008; Raleigh Bailey, “Montagnards – Their History and Culture,” Cultural Orientation Resource Center, \texttt{http://www.cal.org/co/montagnards/vcult.html#11} (accessed September 25, 2008).
\end{itemize}
basement of Holy Trinity Church in Raleigh, N.C. Throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, LFS expanded beyond Raleigh and established offices in Greensboro and Charlotte. In 1986, at the time of the Montagnard resettlement, LFS in Greensboro was a small but efficient organization. Under Director Raleigh Bailey, LFS employed approximately five full-time staff members and relied heavily on numerous volunteers. There are no databases or statistics concerning the sizes of comparable resettlement agencies, of which there are a large number, all with varied structures and a changing number of staff to accommodate different resettlements. It may be surmised that most local resettlement agencies are small because of limited funding and a reliance on volunteers instead paid staff. The small size of LFS was probably normal for a local resettlement agency.

Once refugees are permitted to come to the United States, the State Department pays the resettlement agencies a resettlement allotment (in the 1980s the allotment was approximately $500.00 per refugee, today it is approximately $1,500.00 per refugee) and the state provides the agencies with supplement funds, which vary by state. There are no guidelines which dictate how the resettlement agencies may use the allotment. Some agencies give it directly to the refugee as a “transitional allowance,” while others may keep it within the agency and provide monetary support to the refugee in other ways. According

34 Bailey, interview, May 27, 2008; Shankle, interview, August 19, 2008; Rhonda Rosser, interview by Lauren Raper, Greensboro, NC, June 18, 2008.
35 Robinson, Terms of Refuge, 130-132; Charles Kemp and Lance Rasbridge, Refugee and Immigrant Health: a handbook for health professionals (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 19-20. The State Department and its subsidiary, Office of Refugee Resettlement, provide voluntary agencies and local resettlement agencies funding. Often the Office of Refugee Resettlement will funnel its aid through state offices, such as the Department of Health and Human Services. Kemp and Rasbridge point out that often the
to Raleigh Bailey, LFS chose to use the allotment and state funds to procure housing for the refugees and to hire staff, while relying on volunteers from churches and other civic groups to provide daily assistance to the refugees. According to Bailey, Rosser, and Celia Shankle, former LFS housing coordinator, LFS relied heavily on churches and volunteers whose support was critical to the success of refugee resettlements.36

As with any refugee resettlement contract, there was intense competition among resettlement agencies for the Montagnard contract. Agencies depend on the contracts to receive State Department and local government funds, which sustain them.37 The strongest competition for the Montagnard contract came from Massachusetts. Don Scott, the man who brought the United States’ attention to the Montagnards at the Site II camp, had ties in Massachusetts and was pushing that they be resettled there. Also, the first lady of Massachusetts, Kitty Dukakis, who was very active in refugee issues, heard about the Montagnards and lobbied the State Department for Massachusetts to be the hosting state. According to Bailey, Dukakis called the State Department on various occasions arguing that Massachusetts was a more liberal state than North Carolina and more accepting of new people; and therefore, a better place to resettle the Montagnards. However, Bailey maintained that the Montagnards came from a rural farming area just like North Carolina; therefore, he argued, people in North Carolina could relate to the Montagnards’ lifestyle.38

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37 Robinson, *Terms of Refuge*, 130-140.
38 Bailey, interview, May 27, 2008.
Given the large number of local resettlement agencies throughout the United States, as well as direct competition from states like Massachusetts, why did the State Department select LFS in Greensboro, N.C. to host the Montagnards?

According to Ram Cnaan, chair of the Doctoral Program in Social Welfare at the University of Pennsylvania, LFS established a groundbreaking resettlement model for Southeast Asians during the early 1980s. LFS became a national refugee resettlement model by relying on churches to adopt Southeast Asian refugee families and provide them with constant, one-on-one support. Cnaan points out that the congregational resettlement model had financial perks since most churches donated private funds and goods to help provide for the refugees.\(^{39}\)

LFS was also recognized by the State Department for helping refugees quickly obtain employment and establish independent lives. One of the State Department’s main goals is to help refugees obtain economic self-sufficiency and social integration as quickly as possible.\(^{40}\) The State Department considered LFS a successful resettlement agency in 1986 because “it [had] successfully resettled 3,000 Asian refugees in both Carolinas since 1979.”\(^{41}\) In particular, LFS had coordinated a large resettlement of Khmer refugees to the Greensboro area during the early 1980s. According to a July 1986 article, “None of the LFS refugees [were] on welfare.”\(^{42}\) Rhonda Rosser, who was hired as the Volunteer Coordinator for the

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Khmer resettlement, states that the Khmer resettlement provided LFS training for the Montagnard resettlement and helped the LFS staff learn what to expect from Southeast Asian cultures.\textsuperscript{43} In a November 1986 article in \textit{New York Times}, LFS’s previous work with the Khmer refugees is specifically cited as a primary reason why the State Department chose LFS to facilitate the Montagnard resettlement.\textsuperscript{44}

The Cultural Orientation Resource Center reports that the “supportive business climate with numerous entry level job opportunities” in Greensboro, N.C. was a key reason that LFS was chosen to host the Montagnards.\textsuperscript{45} During the 1980s, the population of Greensboro grew by more than 27,000 people, the mean household income steadily increased, and the unemployment rate was 4.2 percent.\textsuperscript{46} Greensboro had many entry level jobs in textiles, agriculture, wood working, and manufacturing. As Bailey explains, these entry level jobs were well suited for refugees with limited English. As the Montagnards were arriving in the United States, Bailey told a local newspaper that “[In Greensboro,] we have jobs for everybody…[m]ostly jobs Americans don’t want, entry-level factory jobs.”\textsuperscript{47}

Other factors also worked in LFS’s favor. The North Carolina geography and weather helped win LFS the Montagnard contract.

\textsuperscript{43} Rosser, interview, June 18, 2008.
\textsuperscript{45} Bailey, “Montagnards: Their History and Culture,” \url{http://www.cal.org/co/montagnards/vecult.html}.
According to the Cultural Orientation Resource Center’s report, the Montagnards were resettled in North Carolina in part because the “terrain and climate [was] similar to what the refugees had known in their home environment.”\(^48\) The North Carolina terrain and climate was not exactly like the Central Highlands though. During a visit to Greensboro in August 1986, Montagnard leader Y Guk Cil stated that his group “would be pleased to settle in some place where there are mountains and valleys.” He said that “[w]e were told that the landscape is a lot like the Central Highlands, but I think there are maybe more mountains in the Central Highlands.”\(^49\) Even though the Greensboro terrain did not look exactly like the Central Highlands, other areas of North Carolina did. Volunteer Becky Shore, of First Lutheran Church in Greensboro, recalls taking a group of Montagnards on a trip to the Blue Ridge Parkway in the North Carolina mountains and that they were astonished at the red clay soil, mountains, and pine trees that were very similar to the Central Highlands. She says that they kept pointing and repeating, “That look like home!”\(^50\)

Also mentioned as a reason that the Montagnards were relocated to North Carolina was the presence of the Special Forces at Fort Bragg.\(^51\) Indeed the Special Forces did aid the resettlement immensely by helping to provide housing, jobs, and emotional support. But the role of the Special Forces is a controversial one. While unsubstantiated by documents, Bailey claims that the State Department was worried about the Montagnards’ close


\(^{50}\) Becky Shore, interview by Lauren Raper, Greensboro, NC, August 28, 2008.

association with the Special Forces because it feared that it might lead the Montagnards to participate in some clandestine military operations. Bailey states that the State Department made him promise that no Montagnards would be resettled around the Fayetteville area, where Fort Bragg is located. Also, Celia Shankle recalls that LFS treated the subject of FULRO, the organization formed by a group of Montagnards during the Vietnam War which continued to fight the Vietnamese for Montagnard autonomy after 1975, with care. Shankle states that LFS “tried not to mention FULRO…[because] there was kind of an unspoken fear. We really didn’t talk about it much, that [the Montagnards] would get involved with people who wanted them to be mercenaries and talk them into doing more fighting.” This indicates that LFS and the State Department wanted the Montagnards to settle peacefully into civilian life.

Many factors contributed to the State Department’s choice of LFS as the agency to lead the Montagnard resettlement. LFS’s reputation as a successful resettlement agency, and the job availability, terrain, and climate of Greensboro, N.C. were key reasons that LFS was selected. While unclear, it seems that the presence of the Special Forces in North Carolina may not have been a major factor in the decision to choose LFS to host the Montagnards.

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52 Bailey, interview, May 27, 2008. Bailey states that “there was some resistance [from the State Department] towards [the Montagnards] coming to North Carolina because this is the Home of Special Forces” and the State Department feared that the Special Forces would use their close ties with the Montagnards to get them involved with the “Iran-Contra Affair.” He acknowledges that many people have written in newspapers that the Special Forces were a key piece in the discussion about placing the Montagnards in North Carolina; and he states that “I used to let them believe that, I didn’t say anything different because we wanted Special Forces to help.” He continues by saying that it was part of the Lutheran Family Services “agreement with the State Department we had to agree that we would not resettle any in the Fayetteville area,” to guard against the Montagnards becoming involved with “Iran-Contra.” It may be understood that he meant the Montagnards were susceptible to becoming involved with the Contra War in Nicaragua because, as he points out, the Montagnards were skilled guerrilla fighters.


54 Shankle, interview, August 19, 2008.
Preparing for their Arrival

After being chosen to lead the Montagnards’ resettlement, LFS had approximately six months to prepare for their arrival; the Montagnards were approved in May 1986 and scheduled to arrive in North Carolina around November 1, 1986. While this was a very short period of time, Celia Shankle recalls feeling overwhelmed but confident. She states that all refugees have the same basic needs; housing, food, and care, and that LFS knew from past resettlements how to accommodate these needs. During the six months, the State Department sent the Montagnards to a cultural orientation program in the Philippines, while LFS coordinated sponsors, housing and jobs in preparation for their arrival.

In mid-May 1986, the State Department transferred the Montagnards to the U.N. Refugee Processing Center at Bataan, Philippines to participate in a six month cultural orientation program, English language training, and job skills training. The Montagnards learned things like how to greet people, how to go to a doctor’s office, how to apply for a job, how to cross the road safely, how to use public phones, how to use appliances, how to use vacuum cleaners, and how to use electricity and gas.

Cultural orientation programs were established by the U.S. State Department in the 1980s as part of the 1980 Refugee Act to help prepare Southeast Asian refugees for new lives in the United States. The duration of the cultural orientation programs varied but programs

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lasting six months were not unusual. Sheppie Abramowitz explained in November 1986 that the State Department hoped the cultural orientation program would help the Montagnards avoid cultural conflicts that had been experienced by Hmong refugees. Conflicts had occurred between some Hmong and American fishermen and some Hmong were victims of urban crime. Abramowitz stated that “I can’t guarantee it, but we believe some of those problems will not be taking place” with the Montagnards.

The State Department also funded a trip by representatives from LFS and the Greensboro community to the Philippines to visit the Montagnards during their cultural orientation program. On August 20, 1986 the delegation of Raleigh Bailey, Rhonda Rosser (LFS volunteer coordinator), Bill Britain (the executive director of LFS in Raleigh), Florence Gatten (a volunteer from the Greensboro Chamber of Commerce), Steve Ehler (pastor of Lutheran Church of Our Father in Greensboro), Celia Shankle, two Piedmont television crews, and Don Scott left Greensboro for a ten day trip to the Philippines. Even though the group was deluged with rain from a typhoon for the entire visit, it “gathered names, desired living combinations, and job skills from the Montagnards.” According to Shankle, the trip was not absolutely necessary because the majority of the planning was standard, no matter

60 Cummings, “Refugees Arrive in Los Angeles from Vietnam,” *The New York Times*, November 25, 1986. According to Dock R’mah and Thaniel Ha Doi Ksa, two Montagnards who were interviewed for this research, the cultural orientation program did help their transition to life in the United States because it introduced them to the language, new technologies, and customs that they would be encountering. Both concede that the program did not prepare them for everything. Cultural orientation programs have been challenged. Historian James Tollefson argues that cultural orientation programs try to “Americanize” refugees, which damages traditional community structures and disempowers refugees. See: James Tollefson, *Alien Winds: the reeducation of America’s Indochinese refugees* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1989).
where the refugee was from. Also, much of the information the group provided the Montagnards in Thailand was beyond their comprehension due to their lack of knowledge about modern societies.\(^{63}\) For example, Chamber of Commerce representative Florence Gatten gave a presentation about city trash pick-up and showed pictures of the interstate system surrounding Greensboro. Both Bailey and Shankle laughed when recalling how the Montagnards’ eyes bulged and they gasped when seeing the jumbled, cloverleaf pattern road system that they would soon be encountering!\(^{64}\)

Shankle relates that the trip to the Philippines was useful in that it reassured the Montagnards by allowing them to meet the people who would be helping them establish their lives; but the trip was also beneficial for the Americans who were able to learn about the Montagnards’ work with the U.S. army during the Vietnam War and about their struggles afterwards. It was a humbling experience for the Americans. Shankle recalls going to church with the Montagnards and being astounded when the Montagnards’ organist began to play a hymn that sounded familiar. Finally on the last verse, the words came to her; “let every kindred let every tribe on this terrestrial ball, to him all majesty ascribe.” She states that it still sends chills up her spine when she thinks of that moment being surrounded by people she considered so foreign, in a refugee camp, people who seemed different from her in every way, but who worshiped the same God and in the same manner as her.\(^{65}\)

\(^{63}\) Shankle, interview, August 19, 2008; Bailey, interview, May 27, 2008.
\(^{64}\) Shankle, interview, August 19, 2008; Bailey, interview, May 27, 2008.
\(^{65}\) Shankle, interview, August 19, 2008; Edward Perronet, *All Hail the Power of Jesus’ Name*, 1779.
Following the trip to the Philippines by LFS and community representatives, five Montagnard refugees representing the group in the Philippines visited North Carolina. The orientation visit began on Friday, August 29, 1986 in Greensboro and its purpose was to help the five men to gather as much information as possible about North Carolina to allay the Montagnards’ fears. Leader Y Guik Cil stated that “They [the Montagnards in the refugee camp] want to hear about the place – everything here.” Upon return to the Philippines, the small Montagnard delegation planned to inform the others about the 20-plus-hour flight from Bataan to the United States, job prospects, housing, the weather and terrain of North Carolina, and the American people. Cil stated, “I think the thing they fear the most is that they feel a little bit scared of people.” After spending time in Greensboro, the group met with the U.S. Catholic Conference, which coordinated the resettlement in Charlotte, and LFS workers in Raleigh. The group was warmly welcomed by their future sponsors, experiencing their first pot-luck dinner hosted by First Lutheran Church in Greensboro.

While the interchange of Montagnards and volunteers was helpful, there was much for the Americans, as well as the Montagnards, to learn.

Back in the United States, LFS began the work of recruiting and training church sponsors. While everyone at LFS shared this job, Rhonda Rosser was the main volunteer coordinator. LFS focused on recruiting Christian churches to support the Montagnards because there are numerous churches in Greensboro; churches have built in financial support

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66 It is unclear who or what organization paid for the Montagnard delegation’s visit to Greensboro. There is no evidence that the State Department would have paid for the trip, and no precedent was found.
68 Ibid.
69 Ibid.; Rosser, interview, June 18, 2008.
systems, tithes; and members of churches are called by their God to help others. All Montagnards who were resettled in Greensboro were sponsored by Protestant and Catholic churches. Rosser describes her job as “kind of like a sales job really, because it was like a sales pitch. You would have to get them to buy into wanting to help these families, [by explaining] what they’ve been through and everything like that.” Indeed, LFS approached the job of finding sponsors like door-to-door salesmen. Rosser explains that she would call churches and plan a meeting with their congregation where she would present a short slide show about who the Montagnards were, how many were persecuted for practicing Christianity in Vietnam, how they had worked with the U.S. Special Forces, and how they had escaped Vietnam and were being housed at the Site II refugee camp. Rosser explains that her task was to make a quick yet detailed presentation that would appeal to the compassion of the church congregation. Rosser also emphasized the Montagnards’ role in the Vietnam War by focusing on how they had sacrificed their lives for Americans. While Rosser emphasized the Montagnards’ affiliation with the Special Forces, she did not take veterans along with her to present their stories, because they would “drone on” about unimportant details, making the presentation too long to be effective. 70 In all, LFS recruited about fifty-nine churches across the central piedmont as sponsors; all sponsoring churches were white churches, no African-American churches participated. 71

LFS maintained a very close relationship with the churches before and after the Montagnards arrived. LFS distributed a pamphlet that educated churches about the culture, religion, history, and needs of refugees and provided guidance about how the churches could

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70 Rosser, interview, June 18, 2008.
help the refugees assimilate.\textsuperscript{72} It also educated churches about the food the Montagnards were accustomed to eating so when the churches were buying food in preparation for the Montagnards’ arrival, they would not buy only American food and so the churches would not be surprised by “strange” requests. Even after the Montagnards arrived, LFS was on-call twenty-four hours a day, ready to answer questions and help the church sponsors.\textsuperscript{73}

Coordinating housing proved to be a complicated task since so many of the Montagnards were single men. This job was made much easier when Celia Shankle, head housing coordinator, was contacted by Mike Lanaine, a retired Special Forces veteran who offered to buy and fix up several houses close to each other in Greensboro, and give them to LFS to house the Montagnards. According to Shankle, usually LFS tried not to settle refugees in groups, to avoid negative backlash from the community. But Shankle accepted Lanaine’s generous offer because she felt the Montagnards needed to be in groups so that they could support each other. LFS was also able to rent several other houses and apartments in Greensboro; including an old University of North Carolina – Greensboro fraternity house. Most houses and apartments accommodated at least four Montagnards; the fraternity house housed seventeen.\textsuperscript{74} To prepare the local communities, LFS staff and sponsors visited neighboring houses to explain to the neighbors who the Montagnards were and when they would be moving in.

\textsuperscript{73} Rosser, interview, June 18, 2008.
Prior to the Montagnards’ arrival, LFS organized jobs for group. Andy Cline served as the job coordinator. He relied on community contacts to locate jobs for the approximately 100 Montagnards resettling to Greensboro. Cline contacted several textile mills in the area, such as Cone Mills, furniture manufacturing plants, stocking warehouses, such as the K-Mart warehouse, television stations, local farms, car lots, and poultry plants to hire the Montagnards. 75 Both men and women worked, but Rosser explains that most of the women with small children (this was a very small group) opted to stay home rather than pay for childcare. 76

LFS also worked with the Greensboro Chamber of Commerce, but the nature of the partnership is unclear. Bailey credits Don Scott with this partnership, explaining that it was Scott’s idea to the solicit help and endorsement of the Chamber of Commerce. The partnership with the Chamber of Commerce was beneficial for both LFS and the city of Greensboro. According to Bailey the affiliation gave LFS validity, and it portrayed the Montagnard resettlement as a community-wide project, which helped them recruit sponsors. For the Chamber of Commerce the connection to the Montagnard resettlement brought national attention to Greensboro and promoted the city as welcoming and progressive. 77 In 1987 LFS and the Greensboro Chamber of Commerce were awarded a White House Citation for the way they planned and coordinated the Montagnard resettlement. 78 According to

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76 Rosser, interview, August, 28, 2008.
77 Bailey, interview, May 27, 2008.
In Conclusion

On November 25, 1986, the group of 209 Montagnards arrived at the Greensboro, Piedmont Triad Airport to the cheers of church sponsors, veterans, and a high school band. Their journey from Vietnam, through Thailand, Cambodia, and the Philippines to the United States had been long, treacherous, and deadly; but because of the meticulous planning of LFS, their new homes in Greensboro, N.C. were full of promise. It is always a challenge to resettle refugees in a new country and community. Because of its past successes, its local support, and its location in North Carolina, LFS was identified by the national voluntary agency, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services, and the State Department as being the most capable resettlement agency to host the Montagnards. By working closely with local churches, LFS was able to provide thorough one-on-one support to help ease the Montagnards’ adjustment. LFS was also proactive, securing sponsors, housing, and jobs well in advance of the Montagnards’ arrival. The Montagnards’ resettlement was unusual due to the group’s affiliation with the U.S. military and its resettlement as a group in a single location. LFS, local churches, veterans and other organizations worked diligently to help the Montagnards establish new lives in the United States.

79 The Guilford Center, Behavioral Health & Disability Services, Kaleidoscope: Cultural Diversity in Guilford County (Fall 2003), http://www.guilfordcenter.com/resources/Kaleidoscope/Kaleidoscopeall.pdf (accessed March 3, 2009);
Making a House a Home

It had to be a strange scene for everyone present at the Greensboro – Winston Salem – High Point Regional airport on Tuesday, November 25, 1986. Nearly 500 welcomers, including volunteers and veterans waving colorful welcome signs, television crews with cameras, bright lights and microphones, government officials, and the Southeast Guilford High School band crowded a baggage area on the lower level of the airport awaiting the arrival of the 209 Montagnards flying in from Los Angeles. At 5:20 pm, wearing western clothes and carrying hand luggage and small children, the tired, but excited, Montagnards streamed into the baggage area befuddled by the applause, welcoming signs, and patriotic music.¹ The group was exhausted from the fifteen-hour flight from the Philippines to Los Angeles followed by a quick one-day layover and flight to Greensboro, but they were relieved and happy to finally be settling into new lives in North Carolina.² Addressing the enthusiasm of the volunteers and needs of the Montagnards, Bishop Michael McDonald of the Lutheran Church in America of North Carolina welcomed the Montagnards and said “I pray that this warmth continues for you,” thereby implicitly challenging the volunteers.³

The warmth did continue for the Montagnards who were settled in Greensboro and for the volunteers who worked closely with them. In fact, working with the Montagnards

was a life-changing experience for several volunteers, likened to the momentousness and gratification of having children. Who were these volunteers? Why would they give their time and resources to help a group of people that most had never heard of? What did the volunteers do to help the Montagnards settle in North Carolina? And how did they react to the many twists, turns, and strange situations that arose while the Montagnards adjusted to their lives in the United States?

Understanding the volunteers’ experiences is integral to understanding the resettlement as a whole. Their experiences reveal how the resettlement was conducted, what the challenges were and how they were addressed, how the Montagnards formed relationships with their American community, and how the Montagnard resettlement impacted the lives of the volunteers.

The Montagnards Arrive

The evening of November 25, 1986, when the Montagnards arrived in North Carolina, was the culmination of six months of preparation by LFS to recruit and educate hundreds of volunteers; and LFS planned a large welcoming ceremony to celebrate. According to Rhonda Rosser, the LFS volunteer coordinator, LFS wanted to reward and stoke the excitement of the volunteers by hosting a large, and somewhat formal, greeting ceremony at the airport. Rosser states that the welcoming ceremony was “orchestrated” and “made into a big deal” because a lot of people had volunteered their time and money to help the Montagnards, and LFS wanted to recognize them and let them know that their efforts

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were appreciated. The welcoming ceremony had a surprise birthday party feel; as the Montagnards streamed into the baggage area hundreds of volunteers waved large, colorful signs, which Rosser noted most Montagnards could not understand, to welcome the Montagnards to their new home.  

The greeting ceremony was more than an opportunity for LFS to express appreciation to the volunteers and for the volunteers to welcome the Montagnards. The ceremony allowed local dignitaries to draw attention to the city of Greensboro and show that it was a “progressive” and “moderate” city. And the ceremony was a moving, patriotic, reunion. Numerous veterans, such as John Amundson and Jim Morris, as well as Dr. James Turpin, the founder of Project Concern, the charity organization that Don Scott worked with which operated in the Central Highlands during the Vietnam War, attended the ceremony to welcome their former comrades to new peaceful lives. Some veterans reminisced about how the Montagnards had helped and protected them during the war; others sadly lamented that the Montagnards were left in Vietnam to fend for themselves after the United States left. As Jim Morris stated “A lot of them were executed;” then sadly he added that none of the 209 Montagnards arriving in Greensboro were his old comrades “All my guys are dead.”

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6 Rhonda Rosser, interview by Lauren Raper, Greensboro, NC, June 18, 2008.  
The welcoming ceremony was a celebration for LFS, the volunteers, the city of Greensboro, and veterans; but what would happen after the hype? How would churches, volunteers, and the Greensboro community work in the following years to assure that the 209 Montagnards were able to establish successful lives in the United States?

**Church Organizations**

Rosser spent six months, from May 1986 to November 1986, delivering speeches to churches in an intensive effort to recruit and educate sponsors for the Montagnards. Her efforts were successful, and all 100 Montagnards settled in Greensboro were sponsored by churches.¹⁰ Sponsors work in conjunction with the local resettlement agency to provide refugees with transportation, food, housing, clothing, English language training, and cultural orientation.¹¹ LFS did not micro-manage, or require churches to follow a standardized formula of sponsorship, and the amount of participation within the churches varied. While LFS provided constant guidance, each church constructed its own plan of sponsorship.¹²

Even though “churches” were the sponsors, in some cases it was only a small fraction of the church participated. One Sunday school class at West Market Street Methodist Church sponsored a four-person Montagnard family. Helen Wolff, who had assisted LFS during the Khmer resettlement, explains that Don Scott and LFS staff brought a group of former volunteers together to educate them about the Montagnards and solicit their support. Wolff was the representative for West Market Street Methodist, and after hearing about the

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¹² Rosser, interview, June 18, 2008.
Montagnards, she garnered the support of her “very active” adult Sunday school class which agreed to sponsor a Montagnard family. While the wider church congregation was invited to help and donate money, food, clothing, or other items, Wolff’s Sunday school class was the main sponsor.\textsuperscript{13}

In contrast, Becky Shore recalls how a “church-wide collaboration” of the First Lutheran Church sponsored a group of six Montagnard men. Shore explains that the church became involved through the Social Ministry Committee, of which she was a member. Shore was familiar with refugee resettlements and with LFS because she had worked as a volunteer with LFS during the Khmer resettlements. She states that the sponsorship efforts began with the Social Ministry Committee gathering preliminary funds, which it presented to the Church Council for approval; afterwards, the entire congregation became mobilized to contribute to the sponsorship effort.\textsuperscript{14} Mount Pisgah Methodist, which sponsored four Montagnard men, followed a similar path. According to Doug Hinton, Susan Hughes, the head of Outreach Ministry, brought the resettlement project before the church and began recruiting volunteers from the congregation to help.\textsuperscript{15}

These situations reveal how the sponsorship systems within the churches varied. LFS did not require an exact sponsorship system; it only required each church to respond adequately to the refugees’ needs.\textsuperscript{16} Also, Becky Shore and Helen Wolff both agree that their prior experiences with LFS and refugees helped them lead their churches through the

\textsuperscript{13} Helen Wolff, interview by Lauren Raper, Greensboro, NC, August 28, 2008.
\textsuperscript{14} Becky Shore, interview by Lauren Raper, Greensboro, NC, August 28, 2008.
\textsuperscript{15} Doug Hinton, interview by Lauren Raper, Greensboro, NC, August 28, 2008.
\textsuperscript{16} Rosser, interview, June 18, 2008; Raleigh Bailey, interview by Lauren Raper, Greensboro, NC, May 27, 2008.
Montagnard resettlement. Shore explains that her “unique experience of having worked part-time with LFS during the Cambodian resettlement, and being a volunteer…was very helpful because I understood what staff was dealing with behind the scenes.” Her past experiences allowed her to explain to the church congregation what to expect from LFS and the refugees, which helped alleviate some anxieties.¹⁷

**Who Volunteered?**

The level of congregant participation varied within each church. Some congregants supported the Montagnard resettlement by donating money, furniture, food, or cleaning out closets to donate clothes; in fact, one volunteer commented that he was amazed at the number of dirty clothes given as donations! Money and clothing were necessities churches had to gather. Churches raised money for rent, food, and power bills. They also had to gather large quantities of various sized clothing because neither LFS nor the volunteers had any idea what sizes the Montagnards would need; all that the sponsors knew before the Montagnards arrived was that they were small statured people.¹⁸ Even if congregants did not work directly with the Montagnards, their contributions were essential to the resettlement process.

For other congregants, helping the Montagnards became a personal calling. For example, after losing his job volunteer Doug Hinton of Mount Pisgah Methodist was approached by Susan Hughes, the head of Outreach Ministry to help with the resettlement. After repeatedly turning down requests to help, Hinton agreed to go to the arrival ceremony at the airport, and he immediately fell “in love with the people and the culture.” Comically he recalls his first conversation with one of the men his church sponsored. The Montagnard

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¹⁷ Shore, interview, August 28, 2008; Wolff, interview, August 28, 2008.
¹⁸ Wolff, interview, August 28, 2008.
was carrying a small piece of luggage and Hinton asked “Is that all of your luggage?” The Montagnard replied, “Yes.” Hinton asked again, “Do you only have one;” and the Montagnard repeated, “Yes.” Sensing a lack of understanding, Hinton continued, “Do you have more luggage?” And not surprisingly the Montagnard answered, “Yes.”¹⁹

Hinton states that he and his wife worked full time with the Montagnards fostering a mutually respectful relationship. Hinton, who had worked in the corporate world, counseled the Montagnards about financial and social matters. He recalls how wintertime was a challenge for the Montagnards and that “the Montagnards were always concerned with staying warm.” One evening, Hinton received a phone call from one of the Montagnards that they were cold inside their home on Pearson Street; so Hinton took a small space heater to their house and set it up inside their bedroom. Several hours later, Hinton called and asked Y King, one of the Montagnards with an extraordinary sense of humor, if they were warm. Y King replied, “Oh yes, very warm.” Hinson questioned, “so the heater helped?” “Oh yes” answered Y King, “we put it in the bed.” Immediately Hinton jumped in his car and raced across town and ran into a house of four Montagnards laughing at him! Hinton appreciated the Montagnards’ sense of humor, gratitude, and sincerity. For him, helping them adjust to life in the United States became more than a small project; it became his job. After working with the Montagnards, Hinton joined LFS as the Day Care Director and ran a small day care for refugee children.²⁰

Dock R’mah, who was sponsored by First Lutheran Church, emphatically states that volunteer Harold Bunting was a “very special” sponsor and he was the “closest man who

¹⁹ Hinton, interview, August 28, 2008.
²⁰ Hinton, interview, August 28, 2008.
helped us.” Waving his hands and smiling as he remembers Bunting’s help, R’mah says “he took us to the store, he took us e-v-e-r-y-w-h-e-r-e, anytime the whole day Mr. Harold Bunting helped. Now and even then he’s my best friend.”

Churches were not the only institutions to help the Montagnards settle into new lives in the United States. Moses H. Cone Memorial Hospital hired a Montagnard translator and the hospital’s pharmacy agreed to offer discounted prescription drugs to the Montagnards. Helen Wolff remembers one school hiring a Montagnard as a janitor, a job he kept until he retired, and then giving him and his family a house that was on the school’s property. Even though there were very few school age children in the Montagnard group, LFS notified and worked with the local school systems to prepare the education staff for the Montagnard children. Rosser explains that volunteers also educated Montagnard families about the American school system, reassuring them that school buses were safe, that buses would bring their children home at specific times, and that the children were safe in school.

Community volunteers helped as well. Thirty miles south of Greensboro, Audrey M. Henson housed six Montagnards in a home that she had renovated for her son. Her family added bedrooms, fixed up a utility room for a washer and dryer, completely furnished the home and employed all six men in the family’s landscaping business. Henson gave the Montagnards an open invitation to “stay there rent free as long as they wish.”

21 Dock R’mah and Thaniel Ha Doi Ksa, interview by Lauren Raper, Greensboro, NC, September 9, 2008.
24 Rosser, interview, June 18, 2008.
Veterans and veterans’ groups provided housing and transportation for the Montagnards. Mike Lanaine, a Special Forces veteran, donated three houses that he had bought and renovated to the Montagnards. Veterans such as Michael Benge and veterans’ groups like Save the Montagnard People (STMP) have helped the Montagnards establish cultural preservation organizations and have lobbied Congress to press Vietnam to pass human rights legislation. STMP, one of the most prominent Montagnard/Special Forces organizations was founded in 1986 under the leadership of George Clark as a charity organization to provide assistance to Montagnards in the United States and in Vietnam. STMP has also purchased land in Asheboro, N.C. to build a Montagnard cultural center.

While veterans’ organizations, such as STMP, have continued to work very closely with the Montagnards in North Carolina, there have been fractures in the veteran Montagnard relationship. Montagnard Thaniel Ha Doi Ksa arately argues that many veterans groups, STMP in particular, have not listened to the Montagnards’ ideas for ways to preserve the Montagnard culture. He alleges that money raised to help the Montagnards has been squandered by inefficient leadership. Ksa also relates that some veterans worked closely with the Montagnards when they first arrived but, unlike LFS staff and church volunteers, their aid waned after several months.

26 Shankle, interview, August 19, 2008.
The Montagnard resettlement was a community effort. Even though LFS specifically recruited churches to be the primary sponsors, large portions of the community opened their doors to welcome the Montagnards. Businesses hired, even requested, Montagnards to work in their industries, individuals opened their houses and gave of their time, veterans and veterans’ groups took the Montagnards under their wing as a way to repay them for their help during the Vietnam War. The entire community’s involvement was pivotal to the success of the Montagnard resettlement.

**Volunteers: How did they help?**

Volunteers invested large amounts of their time procuring items to furnish, stock, and decorate the Montagnards’ homes, as well as teaching them about western technology and providing them with transportation.

Before the Montagnards arrived, churches furnished homes with furniture, sheets, clothes, food, televisions and books for the Montagnards. Approximately seventeen Montagnards, who were sponsored by three different churches, were assigned to live in the old University of Greensboro fraternity house on Friendly Avenue.\(^{30}\) First Lutheran Church sponsored six of the seventeen men, and coordinated with Christ United Methodist and Ebenezer Lutheran Church to prepare the house for the Montagnards. First Lutheran Church was in charge of furniture. Becky Shore explains how one member of the First Lutheran Church worked in the bedding department of Sears and was able to get Sears to donate beds. Also, several congregants learned that a department store in Greensboro was going to replace

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its carpet, so Shore and several male volunteers harvested the old carpet from the department store and transplanted it to the front rooms of the home.\textsuperscript{31}

Christ United Methodist Church, the church LFS housing coordinator Celia Shankle attends, was in charge of the kitchen.\textsuperscript{32} Becky Shore recalls being surprised by several women, in nice clothing, standing barefoot on the kitchen counters to stock even the highest shelves of the old kitchen cabinets!\textsuperscript{33} The volunteers were informed by LFS not to purchase “American” style foods for the Montagnards, but to be aware of their traditional diet.\textsuperscript{34} With this in mind, Christ United Methodist Church stocked the cupboard and refrigerator with bamboo shoots, rice, garlic, onions, and fish.\textsuperscript{35}

\textit{The New York Times} described the old fraternity house:

Upstairs, in one of the house’s eight bedrooms, plastic bags containing toothpaste and shaving cream rest beside secondhand beds with matching green sheets and pillow cases…For a month now, men and women from three churches here [Greensboro] have been scrubbing floors at the former college fraternity house, filling it with used sofas, dishes from a local cafeteria and a 23-volume set of the Encyclopedia Britannica. The oil tank is full and the $850 a month rent has been paid through December.\textsuperscript{36}

\textsuperscript{31} Shore, interview, August 28, 2008.
\textsuperscript{33} Shore, interview, August 28, 2008.
The volunteers taught the Montagnards English, how to use appliances, drive, how and where to pay bills, and a myriad of other tasks. As volunteer Helen Wolff states, “we were totally ignorant of how little they did know.”

For example, many Montagnards had never slept on a western style bed. Wolff and Hinton both recall visiting the Montagnard houses the day after they arrived and finding the beds taken apart and clothes strewn outside of dressers. Wolff states that “the house looked like a tornado hit it!” Clothing was also a challenge, and some Montagnards who were given long-underwear wore it on top of their clothes. Others did not wear the clothes at all! Hinton recalls visiting the Montagnards’ houses and the men lounging in briefs and the children running around nude. These incidents show how little the Montagnards knew regarding Western culture and tradition. Basics tasks, like how to use furniture and wear western style clothes, and complex tasks, like how to pay bills or drive a car, had to be taught.

Learning how to use appliances was also new. Many Montagnards had never seen or used electric lights, stoves, refrigerators, washer and dryers, toilets or a host of other, ordinary, American appliances. Hinton recalls that one Montagnard family placed their clothes in the bottom of their shower and stomped on them in order to wash them. Some Montagnards “would pick up the receiver when [the telephone] rang and hold it at a distance

37 Wolff, interview, August 28, 2008.
40 Hinton, interview, August 28, 2008.
41 Rosser, interview, June 18, 2008; Shankle, interview, August 19, 2008; Wolff, interview, August 28, 2008; Hinton, interview, August 28, 2008; Shore, interview, August 28, 2008; Brady Faggart, interview by Lauren Raper, Greensboro, NC, August 28, 2008.
42 Hinton, interview, August, 28, 2008.
without saying hello.” Volunteer Keith Austin explains that everything was new to the Montagnards and it took time for them to explore the intricacies of Pac-Man, gasoline pumps, toasters, freezers, heating systems and telephones.\footnote{Minehart, “Montagnards Take Quickly to Monopoly and Other American Ways,” The Associated Press, January 12, 1987.}

Volunteers helped the Montagnards adjust to the North Carolina climate and terrain as well. Brady Faggart, the retired pastor of First Lutheran Church in Greensboro, recalls that the Montagnards “did not know anything about life in North Carolina.” He relates that shortly after the Montagnards arrived in Greensboro, he and several members of his church took their sponsorees to Lake Townsend, which is located north of town, to show them where they could go fishing. While the group was milling around, one Montagnard said “so tell me, where are the elephants and monkeys?”\footnote{Faggart, interview, August 28, 2008.} Becky Shore, recalls a story of volunteers taking a group of Montagnards on a hike through a local forest and having to convince them that there were no tigers in the woods.\footnote{Shore, interview, August 28, 2008.} And Celia Shankle remembers a story about how the Montagnards first saw snow on their plane ride to the United States, and they asked, “when it falls, does it hurt your head?”\footnote{Celia Shankle, interview by Lauren Raper, Greensboro, NC, August 28, 2008.} While aspects of the North Carolina terrain and geography were similar to the Central Highlands, the Montagnards had to adjust to the different animals, changing seasons, and new forms of precipitation in North Carolina.

One of the most time consuming tasks for the volunteers was providing the Montagnards with transportation. An untold number of volunteers provided transportation to places like the Health Department, grocery stores, laundromats, doctors’ offices and
workplaces. Sometimes churches would organize carpools. For example, the three
churches that sponsored the seventeen Montagnards in the old fraternity house rotated
carpools to the grocery store. Becky Shore recalls how each weekend a member from one of
the churches would take three Montagnards to the store in order to buy groceries for the
week. Shankle explains that providing the Montagnards with transportation was a “huge
commitment,” not because of the price of gas (at that time the price of a gallon of regular gas
was approximately seventy-cents) but because of the length of time it had to be provided.
Shankle recalls people in her “church carry[ing] people to work in High Point for months.”
No one knew how long it would take the Montagnards to learn to drive or be able to afford
cars, so the commitment to provide transportation was long-term.

Explaining finances was also tricky. Reflecting in June 2000 about the 1986
Montagnard resettlement, Associated Press journalist Paul Nowell wrote that many
“Montagnards might have imagined they landed on a different planet. They knew nothing
about signing a 30 year mortgage, let alone the concept of 30 years of debt. Equally
unfathomable was writing a check.”

Income taxes, energy bills, the banking system were
foreign to the Montagnards. Volunteers had to reassure the Montagnards that when they
placed their utility checks in the mail, they were not being stolen or disappearing. The

47 Rosser, interview, June 18, 2008.
48 Shore, interview, August 28, 2008.
49 Shankle, interview, August 19, 2008.
50 Minehart, “Montagnards Take Quickly to Monopoly and Other American Ways,” The Associated Press, January 12, 1987. According to Minehart, some Montagnards began getting driving permits a little more than a month after they arrived and some church members donated old cars for them to drive.
52 Shankle, interview, August 19, 2008.
Montagnards were astounded by automatic teller machines, and were “thrilled with that money out of the side of a wall!”\textsuperscript{53}

Shankle states that the volunteers were responsible for tutoring the Montagnards about every facet of life and that many gave their time and resources “faithfully.”\textsuperscript{54}

The broad response of churches to help the Montagnards is a testament to the many people who responded positively to the Montagnards resettling in Greensboro. However, there were situations when church sponsors were not doing their jobs properly. Neither Rosser nor Shankle provided the names of churches that were reprimanded for not providing proper assistance; however, each conceded that there were “some” churches. In these cases LFS stepped in and provided the church with more counseling about how best to work with the Montagnards. No one from LFS divulged if any churches lost sponsorship of their group.\textsuperscript{55}

\textit{The Measure of Success}

According to the State Department “the principle objective of the resettlement plan shall be assisting the refugee to obtain early employment.” The burden of helping refugees learn job skills, find employment, and navigate the American financial system falls heavily on the resettlement agencies and volunteers since “refugees are admitted on humanitarian


\textsuperscript{54} Shankle, interview, August 19, 2008.

\textsuperscript{55} Rosser, interview, June 18, 2008; Shankle, interview, August 19, 2008; Bailey, interview, May 27, 2008.
grounds, and there is no requirement that they demonstrate economic self-sufficiency” before they are permitted to enter the country.\(^{56}\)

The Montagnard resettlement in Greensboro was successful according to the State Department’s standards because the majority of Montagnards were able to grasp American finances and all “quickly found work,” while several worked two and three jobs, “enough to take care of themselves without public assistance.”\(^{57}\) One prime example is Thaniel Ha Doi Ksa. Thaniel worked two and three jobs before purchasing his first home in Greensboro; now he owns his own home renovation business, lawn care business, and is active in flipping houses. Smiling widely, Dock R’mah, one of Thaniel’s closest friends, smacks Thaniel’s leg and declares “he’s the businessman!”\(^{58}\)

**Motivations**

Many people donated their time and resources to help the Montagnards, but why? Why would people who had never heard of the Montagnards, who had never seen a Montagnard, devote their time and money to help them settle in Greensboro?

Several volunteers like Helen Wolff and Becky Shore helped LFS during the early 1980s resettlement of Khmer peoples. Both women state that the positive experiences they had with the Khmer peoples and the knowledge they learned about how to work with LFS and refugee groups influenced their decision to help the Montagnards. Wolff, Shore and


\(^{58}\) R’mah and Ksa, interview, September 9, 2008.
others who had worked with refugees in the past helped with the Montagnard resettlement because of prior positive experiences working with LFS and refugees.\textsuperscript{59}

For many volunteers their Christian faith was the main motivation for helping the Montagnards. Sociologist Jeremy Hein explains in *Ethnic Origins* that religion provides the “moral imperatives for assisting those in need” and the manner in which churches respond to refugee resettlements reveals the depth of their “Christian humanitarianism.”\textsuperscript{60} In *Beyond the Gateway*, Raleigh Bailey writes that particularly in North Carolina a strong Evangelical Protestant identity reinforces and promotes a Protestant ethic of “neighborliness, family and community responsibility” which influences the way North Carolina institutions approach refugee issues.\textsuperscript{61} For the Greensboro Christian community, the Montagnard resettlement was the perfect opportunity to exercise the Christian ethic of helping those in need. As Reverend Stephen Ehlers of the Lutheran Church of Our Father stated “It’s the way we regard the gospel: If you have two coats, give your brother one.”\textsuperscript{62}

The Montagnards’ Christian faith may have been another reason that so many people volunteered. According to Rosser, Shankle, and Bailey the majority of the 209 Montagnards were Christian and all agreed that the Montagnards’ Christian faith motivated some churches to participate in their resettlement. All 100 Montagnards who were resettled in Greensboro were sponsored by Protestant and Catholic churches.\textsuperscript{63} Bailey argues in *Beyond the Gateway*

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{59} Rosser, interview, June 18, 2008; Wolff, interview, August 28, 2008; Shore, interview, August 28, 2008.
\bibitem{61} Bailey, “New Immigrant Communities in the North Carolina Piedmont Triad,” in *Beyond the Gateway*, 58.
\bibitem{63} Rosser, interview, June 18, 2008; Bailey, interview, May 27, 2008; Shankle, interview, August 19, 2008.
\end{thebibliography}
that because many Montagnards were devout Christians they received more assistance from local churches. 64 *Kaleidoscope*, a pamphlet that surveys the various ethnic groups that have immigrated to the Greensboro area, refers to the Montagnards as “evangelical Christian war heroes” and plainly states that “Many are devout Christians. For this reason, many churches got involved with their resettlement.”65

Compassion also motivated the volunteers. LFS staff as well as veterans who had served with the Montagnards in Vietnam informed the volunteers that the Montagnards had been severely discriminated against and persecuted by the Vietnamese for their Christian beliefs.66 Some churches and individual volunteers were persuaded to help the Montagnards because they had suffered persecution because of their faith. Even though it is difficult to compare the Montagnard resettlement to the Khmer resettlement that LFS facilitated in the early 1980s because of fundamental differences in the way the Khmer refugees were admitted into the United States, Bailey stated that because the majority of Khmer refugees were not Christian it was harder to recruit churches as sponsors. While some churches helped facilitate the Khmer resettlement, LFS had to rely more on individuals and civic organizations.67

The Montagnards’ affiliation with the U.S. Special Forces motivated some volunteers to help with their resettlement. In *Kaleidoscope*, the Montagnards are referred to as “freedom fighters,” who “served heroically for this country.”68 Bailey claims that the

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64 Bailey, “New Immigrant Communities in the North Carolina Piedmont Triad,” in *Beyond the Gateway*, 58.
65 The Guilford Center, *Kaleidoscope* (Fall 2003).
66 Rosser, interview, June 18, 2008; Faggart, interview, August 28, 2008.
68 The Guilford Center, *Kaleidoscope* (Fall 2003).
Montagnards’ “status as war heroes” prompted more businesses, veterans’ groups, and non-profit organizations to help. Many volunteers cited the Montagnards’ loyalty to the United States during the Vietnam War as a reason they wanted to help. Francis Perkins, a retired businessman in Greensboro states that “My understanding is that when we [the United States] pulled out of Vietnam, we promised to help these people out. We haven’t done it. I felt that was an unfilled promise.” Because of that unfilled promise Perkins states that he and other members of Christ Methodist Church “were determined to help the Montagnards feel comfortable in America.” When recruiting churches to be sponsors, Rosser explains she would focus on the Montagnards’ service to the U.S. military, explaining how Montagnards sacrificed their lives during the war for Americans, in order to appeal to peoples’ compassionate side and show that the Montagnards had a personal connection with the United States.

Fulfilling unfulfilled promises was a key motivation for veterans to help the Montagnards. In a 2004 interview, Special Forces veteran Mike Lanaine explained that “veterans are trying to live up to a commitment they feel the United States broke at the end of the war. When the US pulled out of Vietnam, the Montagnards were left behind, and found themselves at the mercy of the enemy. Many ex-Green Berets remain bitter about that and believe their own government forced them to desert a trusted ally.”

71 Rosser, interview, June 18, 2008.
There were a variety of reasons and motivations why thousands of people in the Greensboro area donated their time, money, homes and other resources to the Montagnards. While it is impossible to know everyone’s personal motivations, the volunteers’ and Montagnards’ shared Christian faith, the Montagnards’ affiliation with the United States Special Forces, and a desire to make good on a broken promise were major reasons why a large portion of the Greensboro community aided the Montagnard resettlement.

**Financial Worth of Community Volunteers**

The State Department works with a variety of faith-based resettlement agencies and depends on congregational sponsors and community volunteers across the United States to facilitate refugee resettlements. Author Jeffery MacDonald explains that it saves the Federal government money to contract out refugee services to faith-based organizations because they can donate personal assistance, funds, and other resources at no, or little, cost to the Federal government.73 One interesting study facilitated by Greensboro Urban Ministry in 1992 tried to calculate the financial value of the volunteers’ service. The study documented 60,000 hours of volunteer service helping refugees assimilate to life in the United States; at $5.35 per hour (approximate minimum wage in 1992), the volunteers provided more than $300,000 worth of volunteer labor that the State Department did not have to compensate.74 MacDonald points out that the $300,000 is a conservative estimate since doctors, lawyers, accountants and other professionals who earned much more than the minimum wage donated

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their services as well. Churches and volunteers provide extensive support to refugees and help provide services that the State Department may not be able to afford for all refugees.

The Montagnards were beneficiaries of this congregational support. It is impossible to place a precise monetary value on the daily assistance churches and volunteers provided the Montagnards, but it is clear that they donated a broad and extensive range of support that helped make the resettlement successful.

**Community Reactions**

The reactions of members of the community may vary with any refugee resettlement, and the Montagnard resettlement was no exception. The substantial church and volunteer responses are a testament of the positive reactions to the Montagnards settling in Greensboro; however, there were some negative sentiments voiced publically and privately.

Shankle reports that the LFS office received a few “complaints that needy Greensboro residents were being ignored while so much attention was being paid to the Asian refugees” and that the Montagnards would be taking jobs away from Greensboro citizens. Shankle’s response to these arguments was to ask “if you were an employer and had the opportunity to hire a non-English speaker or an English speaker which would you chose?” According to Bailey, these objections are common when any group relocates to a new location. Neither Shankle nor Bailey gave much thought to these complaints, claiming that these are normal, expected responses, always voiced by few residents.

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76 Shankle, interview, August 19, 2008.
Fear of the Montagnards and their culture spawned negative responses against the resettlement. Even though news media had reported on the Montagnards, their culture, and the LFS resettlement, many in the Greensboro community knew nothing about them. In fact, the most common reaction to this research is still “Monten-who?” But, even when people were educated about the Montagnards, all fears did not subside. One volunteer, who was substantially involved with the Montagnard resettlement, recalls the following incident with his family which shows how prevalent fears of the Montagnards and their culture were. This volunteer has asked to remain anonymous out of respect for his family, so I will refer to him as “Jack” for the story.

One evening Jack was contacted by a Montagnard who reported that he was having a heated dispute with another Montagnard and he was going to kill him. To defuse the situation and avoid the risk of homicide, Jack agreed to take the two disputing Montagnards to Raleigh to meet with Reverend Charlie Long for counseling. Reverend Long is the former pastor of North Ridge Church, in Raleigh; he and his wife were missionaries in the Central Highlands before and during the Vietnam War where they established leprosy clinics for the Montagnards. Reverend Long, who spoke the Jarai language, worked closely with LFS to help facilitate the resettlement in Raleigh.

Before leaving Greensboro, Jack called his brother in Raleigh to tell him that he would be in town for a visit since he had to take the two feuding Montagnards to counseling. Before heading to Raleigh another Montagnard asked Jack if he could go on the trip and meet Jack’s mother. In the Montagnard culture the mother is the power within the family and identity is traced through the mother’s family; because he respected Jack and his wife so
much, he really wanted to meet Jack’s mother. Jack agreed, and while the two disputing Montagnards met with Reverend Long, Jack and the third Montagnard visited his mother who lived alone in Raleigh.

During the visit, Jack’s Montagnard friend just sat and stared at his mother and when they were about to leave, he asked if he could have his picture taken with Jack’s mother. Jack said ok, and the Montagnard went and sat closely beside his mother, placed his arm around her shoulder, and smiled broadly for the camera. After visiting with Jack’s mother, the two visited with Jack’s brother and sister-in-law. Again, Jack’s friend sat and stared at his sister-in-law, and at the end of the visit asked to have his picture taken again. So the Montagnard sat himself snuggly between Jack’s brother and sister-in-law and smiled again for the camera. After snapping the picture, Jack and his Montagnard friend left to pick up the others and return to Greensboro.

The next morning, Jack received a phone call from his brother who said he was “extremely worried” about Jack because he was dealing with wild, primitive, mountain people. Jack’s brother accused Jack of putting his wife in danger of being either raped or killed by these primitive men. Jack’s mother also called objecting to his work with the Montagnards, claiming that the Montagnard had squeezed her shoulder in a sexual manner. She claimed that he had mental problems and needed to see somebody. Jack was dumbfounded on several levels. He and his wife were dedicated to helping the Montagnards. They worked tirelessly getting to know them and helping them settle in Greensboro, and Jack

completely trusted them. Jack attributes his family’s negative reactions and fears to ignorance that led them to misunderstand the Montagnard culture.\textsuperscript{79}

The veterans’ group Save the Montagnard People (STMP) has also received negative feedback from the Asheboro community about its plan to convert 100 acres into a Montagnard cultural preservation center and communal farm. STMP plans to build a replica of a traditional Montagnard longhouse and host large festivals celebrating the Montagnard heritage. But some neighbors have opposed the project arguing that the rural farming community would not be able to accommodate the large crowds attracted by the festivals. In January 2004, Larry McPherson, whose farm adjoins sections of STMP’s property, stated that “It just seems much too big and much too commercial…I don't want to come off that we're down on the Montagnards, because we're not. We know the Montagnards are good people. If it had been any other group, we would have had the same feelings because of the hugeness of what they're proposing.” Asheboro County Commissioners narrowly agreed to STMP’s project and the organization is continuing to raise funds to pay for the cultural preservation center and longhouse.\textsuperscript{80}

Sociologist Jeremy Hein describes the manner in which communities both help and fear refugee resettlements as “small-town hospitality and hate.”\textsuperscript{81} This research did not find

\textsuperscript{79} Interview with a volunteer, by Lauren Raper, Greensboro, NC, August 28, 2008; Charles Long, phone interview by Lauren Raper, August 3, 2008. Because this volunteer relays sensitive information about his/her family, he/she wishes to remain anonymous.


\textsuperscript{81} Hein, \textit{Ethnic Origins}, 79.
hatred or blatant racism directed towards the Montagnards, but the Montagnards’ potential impact on the community and foreign culture aroused some negative reactions.

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Jim Barker, who worked with Army intelligence during the Vietnam War, bleakly lamented that for the “Montagnards I knew, I thought it would be very difficult [for them] to adjust to anywhere, much less the United States. They were not aware of anything beyond their own culture.” Indeed, there were many odds stacked against the 209 Montagnards who arrived in Greensboro on Tuesday, November 25, 1986. Cultural challenges, language barriers, technology gaps and a host of other trials greeted them; but welcoming the Montagnards were thousands of eager volunteers who were prepared to sacrifice and work to help them establish happy and successful homes in the United States.

LFS concentrated on recruiting and educating churches and church congregants to be the primary Montagnard sponsors, and the churches were allowed to organize their sponsorship efforts individually. This loose management system allowed each church to adapt its efforts to the needs of their sponsorees. The extensive efforts of church volunteers were the key components of the Montagnard resettlement and one of the main reasons why the Montagnards were able to settle and adjust successfully to life in the United States. But churches and church members were not the only institutions and people to help the Montagnards. The resettlement was clearly a community-wide effort.

But why was there such a broad response to the Montagnards? The volunteers’ Christian faith and the Montagnards’ Christian faith played a large role in motivating people

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to aid the Montagnard resettlement. But as important was the Montagnards’ affiliation with the United States Special Forces. Many volunteers felt that the Montagnards were war heroes, and they expressed anger against the U.S. government for abandoning the Montagnards at the end of the Vietnam War. This association made the Montagnards unusual refugees with a claim on America’s conscience. Even without these connections many churches would have helped with the resettlement, but these connections helped to increase the number of volunteers.

Knowing who the volunteers were and what they did to facilitate the Montagnard resettlement is essential to understanding why the Montagnard resettlement was successful. A close examination of the volunteers’ and community’s actions and motivations may also benefit future refugee resettlements, because national voluntary resettlement agencies and local agencies can replicate the factors that made the resettlement a success. The Montagnard resettlement provides a framework for how resettlement agencies can work with the community to help stretch refugee funding to provide refugees with comprehensive assistance.
Conclusion

In November 1986, 209 Montagnard refugees were resettled from the jungles of Vietnam and Cambodia to the Piedmont of North Carolina. In 1992, 402 more Montagnards joined the North Carolina community, followed by approximately 900 more in 2002. The community continues to grow as Montagnards petition the U.S. and Vietnamese governments to allow their family members to join them in the United States.\(^1\) On June 8, 2007, the N.C. Department of Health and Human Services reported that North Carolina was home to “more than 8,000 Montagnards, which is the largest concentration of Montagnard people outside the [H]ighlands of Vietnam.”\(^2\)

This research chronicled how the first group of 209 Montagnards journeyed from the jungles of Vietnam to Greensboro, N.C., and it explained how the Montagnard resettlement was facilitated. It suggests that this resettlement had unusual aspects because of the Montagnards’ affiliation with the U.S. Special Forces during the Vietnam War. It also proposes that the manner in which LFS and volunteers facilitated the resettlement led to the Montagnards’ successful adjustment to life in the United States. Even though this research narrowly focuses on the 1986 Montagnard resettlement to Greensboro, NC, it raises broader questions and issues pertaining to refugee resettlement and America’s memory of the Vietnam War.

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The Montagnards and Memory

In 1985, after surrendering their fight against the Communist Vietnamese government and escaping the grip of the Khmer Rouge, the 209 Montagnards joined millions of refugees crowding Thailand’s numerous refugee camps. According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioners for Refugees (UNHCR), by the end of the 1980s the worldwide refugee population was approximately 15 million and Indochina was overflowing with political and economic refugees. Also during the 1980s, UNHCR’s refugee camps grew astronomically, with some camps reporting populations larger than Thai cities, and camps became semi-permanent homes for some refugees who languished for decades waiting for asylum or repatriation.3 Considering the large volume of refugees around the world and the long periods of time many groups had to spend in refugee camps, why did a group of 209 Montagnards receive individual attention from the U.S. State Department and get permission to resettle in the United States in as few as thirteen months?4 This research suggests that the Montagnards’ affiliation with the U.S. Special Forces during the Vietnam War was the catalyst that spurred the State Department to quickly resettle the Montagnards as well as an important reason so many volunteers helped in their resettlement.

Don Scott, the former aid worker in Vietnam who brought the Montagnards to the United States’ attention, skillfully and selectively marketed them as loyal, brave, self-

sacrificing American soldiers who had been abandoned by the American government. Even though only about thirty of the 209 Montagnards at Site II had fought with the United States, Scott emphasized their military services as a way to delineate the group as special refugees. Even after the Montagnards were approved for resettlement in May 1986, this rhetoric continued to be employed by Lutheran Family Services of North Carolina to recruit volunteers to help facilitate the resettlement.

Emphasizing the Montagnards’ affiliations with the Special Forces and portraying them as victims of U.S. foreign policy was crucial in building support for their resettlement. According to the UNHCR, by the early 1980s Western countries, in particular the United States, became increasingly fatigued with resettling Vietnamese refugees. Historian James Tollefson has referred to this as “compassion fatigue.” The Montagnards’ affiliation with the U.S. military set them apart from the hordes of other refugees and helped create personal connections between them and the American people and government. Moreover, the Montagnards’ American comrades acted as their personal advocates, directing the State Department’s and American people’s attention toward them by stressing their loyal military service.

But it took more than a desire to redeem the broken promises made to the Montagnards to make the resettlement successful. It also required skill. LFS was able to conduct a successful resettlement for several reasons. First, LFS knew what it was doing. During the early 1980s LFS built a comprehensive model for refugee resettlements by

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5 The use of the term “marketing” in this study is not meant in a pejorative sense.
working with Khmer refugees. LFS understood the needs of refugees, and it knew how to mobilize community volunteers to satisfy those needs. LFS’s close relationship with local churches was the core of its resettlement success. It educated and coordinated church sponsors who provided food, clothing, rent, English language training, transportation, financial training, and a host of other supports that helped the Montagnards adjust to life in the United States successfully.

One crucial aspect of the Montagnard resettlement was the Montagnards’ and volunteers’ shared Christian faith. This research suggests that to some extent churches were motivated to help the Montagnards because they were fellow Christians.

According to The Center for Comparative Immigration Studies, the federal government prohibits voluntary agencies from spending federal dollars on religious activities, proselytizing refugees, or forcing refugees to attend worship services in exchange for aid. How can the U.S. government enforce this policy? Indeed, many faith-based voluntary agencies “incorporate religion in their organizational activities and to mobilize religious resources” to help refugees.8 Bailey admits that without constant monitoring, which is often beyond the financial and personnel means of local resettlement agencies, there is no way to guard against this.9 Also, some critics charge that the U.S. government’s partnership with faith-based organizations infringes on the separation of church and state. Historian Bruce Nichols’s study The Uneasy Alliance: religion, refugee work, and US foreign policy argues that in refugee policy religious and political concerns are often mixed

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9 Bailey, interview, May 27, 2008.
but the line between church and state has become increasingly blurred.\textsuperscript{10} Studies like this one, which analyze how resettlement agencies and volunteers work with refugees, begin to address these issues, but more research is necessary.

This research also suggests that the Montagnard resettlement provided the U.S. government, veterans, and American citizens a means to heal memories of guilt and defeat from the Vietnam War. It argues that the act of facilitating the resettlement and the resulting Montagnard community are living memorials to the Vietnam War. In many regards the Montagnard living memorial may be compared to the act of placing flowers on a grave, it was fleeting and it represented varying memories of the war. By analyzing the Montagnard resettlement through the paradigm of Vietnam War memory construction it reveals many of the contradictions and complexities of memory and history studies.

In his study “Indochinese refugees: a challenge to America’s memory of Vietnam,” Tollefson argues that during the post-1975 period, the U.S. government failed to recognize how the U.S. foreign policies helped to create the deluge of Indochinese refugees. Instead the government blamed Communism for creating refugees and saw the United States as saving them. Tollefson claims that this perspective has not contributed to reconciliation and healing of America’s memory of the Vietnam War because it refuses to confront how United States policies have contributed to creating refugees.\textsuperscript{11}

Aspects of the Montagnard story seem to contradict parts of this argument. Scott’s campaign intentionally selectively marketed the Montagnards as victims of the United States’

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 263.
failed policies and promises in Vietnam. It placed blame squarely on the U.S. government for making the Montagnards refugees. It may be surmised that the high profile media campaign publically embarrassed the U.S. government, which seems to have influenced its quick decision to grant the Montagnards asylum. While the U.S. government never explicitly accepted responsibility for the Montagnards’ refugee situation, expediting their resettlement was a small step towards the U.S. government assuming some responsibility for their Montagnards’ status.

The Montagnard resettlement provided veterans with a means to redeem negative memories of the Vietnam War. Historian Keith Beattie argues that in the 1980s the characterization of Vietnam veterans shifted from emotionally unstable outcasts to American heroes who had the authority, based on their war experience, to speak out against U.S. domestic and foreign policies. According to Beattie, by speaking out the veterans were able to expose and heal their negative memories of the war.12 Throughout the 1980s Americans’ efforts to publicly remember the war and honor veterans increased as veterans’ participation in political and public activism rose. The political and moral activism, by which veterans were able to tell their stories to American society and advocate ending unjust conditions created by the war, helped them to reconcile and heal memories of grief, guilt and anger.13 An example of this is the Prisoner of War issue. By participating in the national POW

discussion veterans were able to commemorate the war and publically remember veterans as American heroes.\textsuperscript{14}

The 1986 Montagnard resettlement may be understood as a public campaign by veterans to remember their participation in the war, to garner respect for their Montagnard comrades, and to rectify memories of guilt, anger, and abandonment caused by the end of the war. The small group of veterans and former aid workers who banded together to campaign for the Montagnards’ resettlement were acting, in historian Jay Winter’s terms, as “memory activists.” This small group was united by their common experiences with the Montagnards in an effort to make their personal memories public through the Montagnard resettlement.\textsuperscript{15} By speaking out about the Montagnards’ sacrifices, veterans were publicly remembering and reaffirming the actions and relationships they forged during the war and shaping the way Montagnards were remembered as part of the war. By bringing the Montagnards to the United States, veterans were rectifying the abandonment of the Montagnards by the U.S. government and military. The public campaign explaining the Montagnards’ sacrifice and garnering support for their resettlement is an example of veterans’ collective efforts to reconstruct the public memory of the war, to build a memory that admitted unjust actions of the United States but allowed veterans, the U.S. government, and citizens a chance to atone for them.

The role of veterans in the resettlement process indicates a contradiction. While veterans led the selective marketing campaign to garner support for the Montagnards, they were mostly held at arm’s length for the actual resettlement. Veterans donated many items

\textsuperscript{14} Bleakney, \textit{Revisiting Vietnam}, 5-10.
\textsuperscript{15} Jay Winter, \textit{Remembering War} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 136-139.
such as clothing, food, and housing; however, only churches and LFS staff worked daily to facilitate the resettlement. In some respects, veterans were discouraged by LFS and the State Department from being heavily involved.

The contradiction of veterans being used as effective mouthpieces but nominal facilitators for the resettlement may be attributed to the view of veterans during the time period the resettlement occurred. Historian Keith Beattie writes that during the 1980s Vietnam veterans were viewed largely by the American public as the only authorities who could speak legitimately about the Vietnam War; but at the same time, veterans were regarded cautiously and stereotyped as being mentally unstable. The contradictory desire to have veterans speak but then disappear seems to reflect Beattie’s explanations of the conflicting views of Vietnam veterans during the 1980s.

Also, veterans testified about the sacrifice and death of wartime, but the Montagnard resettlement occurred in peacetime. It may be surmised that for the Montagnard resettlement to heal negative memories of war, LFS staff and volunteers wanted to move the rhetoric away from the past and toward the positive and healing potential of the resettlement. Veterans’ accounts were necessary to remind the American public of the negative memories and to invoke compassion for the Montagnards, but in order for those memories to be reconstructed, the rhetoric had to shift to the successful nature of the resettlement.

The Montagnard resettlement also allowed American citizens the opportunity to redeem shameful memories of the Vietnam War and reshape its public meaning. Most scholarship concerning the public meaning and memory of the Vietnam War focuses on the

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16 Beattie, *The Scar that Binds*, 78-105.
Vietnam Memorial. One of the most prominent of these studies is Kristen Haas’s *Carried to the Wall*. Haas argues that the items people leave at the Wall represent a public dialogue about the meaning of the war in America. By leaving items at the Wall people are able to express their personal memories of the war and to participate in the construction of the public’s memory of the war.17

The Montagnard resettlement may be interpreted not only as a public negotiation of the memory of the war, but a rectification of the memory by American citizens. Helping to resettle the Montagnards became a way for some volunteers to personally redeem unjust actions of the U.S. government and military towards its allies; it provided a way to regain the moral high ground forfeited at the end of the war. In a way the Montagnard resettlement may be understood as a living memorial to the Vietnam War. It was a memorial that was constructed by veterans and volunteers who worked to reconstruct and propagate a new memory of the Vietnam War which incorporated the sacrifices of indigenous groups, the fallibility of the U.S. government, and the responsibility of the United States in abandoning allies and creating refugees.

However the concept of a refugee living memorial raises complex issues. In order for the living memorial to be successful the Montagnards had to assimilate into American society, the action of the volunteers had to end, and in a sense the community had to disappear. This challenges the traditional purpose of memorials, which is to be highly visible very public reminders of what is being memorialized.

It may be deduced that in the Montagnard resettlement the actions of the volunteers were the memorial, not the resulting Montagnard community. Like placing flowers on a grave or an item at the Vietnam Memorial Wall, it is the personal action that creates the memorial. Some memorials and the memories they represent are fleeting.

In his campaign to get the Montagnards settled in the United States, Don Scott expertly framed the Montagnard resettlement within the paradigm of the American public’s memory of the war and post-Vietnam War guilt. Don Scott’s campaign helped to create a new collective memory of the war which motivated people to help facilitate the Montagnard resettlement. This research suggests that the Montagnard resettlement was a micro-case of the U.S. government, citizens, and veterans trying to redeem memories of guilt and defeat from the Vietnam War.

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This study is one small piece of the Montagnard story and there are many more aspects that deserve study. For example, analysis of the Montagnards’ U.S. military service, how gender and family relations affected their resettlement, and how the Montagnards are assimilating to American ways of life while maintaining Montagnard culture need to be examined. A comparative analysis of the Montagnard resettlement and other resettlements would also be informative.

The focus of this research is narrow; therefore, its findings and conclusions are tentative. But, because refugee resettlements are handled differently across the United States and procedures are constantly changing, in-depth and singular studies, such as this, are

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18 Jay Winter, Remembering War, 22.
necessary to comprehensively analyze the refugee resettlement system. Comparing how various resettlements are conducted may provide insights into how the U.S. government and local resettlement agencies can strengthen their partnerships and how resettlement agencies can best accommodate the needs and concerns of refugees and local communities.

The Montagnard resettlement reveals how refugee resettlements may be interpreted as living memorials meant to reshape the American public’s collective memory of the Vietnam War. It highlights many of the difficulties in analyzing how the publics’ memory of the Vietnam War is continually renegotiated through memorials and personal actions.
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