

## *Fort Indiantown Gap and Pennsylvania's Role in Refugee Resettlement*

Fort Indiantown Gap, located near Annville in Dauphin County, Pennsylvania, is celebrated as a Pennsylvania Army and National Guard training center. Less well known, however, is the military site's connection to Vietnamese and Cambodian refugees. In 1932, the state of Pennsylvania purchased more than 18,000 acres of land in northern Lebanon and Dauphin Counties to establish a munitions testing and military training site for the Pennsylvania National Guard. The federal government contributed funds for its construction through public works programs, and by 1934 the Indiantown Gap Military Reservation, named after a former Native American village located in a gap in the Blue Mountains, was up and running. The reservation fell under federal control during World War II and was used as training grounds for soldiers and housing for German prisoners of war, many of whom labored on nearby farms. Today, the Pennsylvania National Guard (PNG) maintains the reservation, known as Fort Indiantown Gap since 1975, and operates a museum dedicated to the history of the PNG.<sup>1</sup>

Hidden within the history of Fort Indiantown Gap are the stories of the more than 32,000 Vietnamese and Cambodian refugees who passed through the barracks on their way to resettlement during the late 1970s. Following the fall of Saigon in 1975, thousands of Vietnamese and, later, Cambodians clamored to escape the wreckage of the war and the brutality of the Khmer Rouge. In 1975, President Ford established federally funded programs to help refugees settle in the United States. Once they arrived from stays at camps in Guam or the Philippines, refugees were taken to resettlement camps before being "processed" by social service agents who helped them locate sponsors and jobs. Starting with the arrival of the first refugees in 1975, military bases across the United States, including Fort Indiantown Gap, served as refugee resettlement camps.<sup>2</sup>

While awaiting processing in Indiantown Gap, refugees attended English language classes, participated in sports, and searched for employ-

<sup>1</sup> For an introduction to the history of Fort Indiantown Gap, see "Indiantown Gap Military Reservation Historical Marker," *ExplorePAhistory.com*, accessed Sept. 12, 2016, <http://explorepahistory.com/hmarker.php?markerId=1-A-2D5>.

<sup>2</sup> For more on Vietnamese refugees who came to the United States, see Erika Lee, *The Making of Asian America: A History* (New York, 2015), 322–27. For more on Cambodian refugees in America, see Eric Tang, *Unsettled: Cambodian Refugees in the New York City Hyperghetto* (Philadelphia, 2015).

ment in Pennsylvania. Although many of the refugees grew bored with life in the camp (including a young refugee who complained, “one can only play so much volleyball”), others expressed satisfaction with the “excellent” conditions and resources at Indiantown, especially when compared to what they had escaped in Vietnam and Cambodia.<sup>3</sup> Adjusting to life in America and coping with psychological and emotional trauma were not easy tasks, but refugees yearned for a new life in the United States. Indiantown Gap quickly gained a reputation as a “fast” processing center, and by the early 1980s, around 12,000 refugees had found work and sponsors in Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and Harrisburg, making Pennsylvania the state with the third-largest population of refugees (after California and Texas) at the time.<sup>4</sup>

For refugees, life outside of Indiantown Gap was often complex. Those refugees who settled in the larger cities in Pennsylvania could more easily “blend in,” as one Pennsylvania resident put it, than the Vietnamese and Cambodians who found themselves in smaller towns in central Pennsylvania. In such environments, it was far more difficult for immigrants and racial minorities to mesh with local, mainly white residents. “Some people would look at me and give me strange looks like they were strange or nervous that they didn’t know how to respond,” recalled twenty-three-year-old refugee Hung Bui, who left Indiantown Gap with the sponsorship of a local couple in Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania, in 1975 and found a job at a local hospital.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, some local residents in Bloomsburg and other small towns in the Susquehanna Valley were not receptive to refugees, either because they represented the “enemies” during the Vietnam War or because the federal government supposedly gave them “handouts” while Americans struggled with inflation and unemployment during the 1970s.<sup>6</sup> Despite some less than ideal interactions, other refugees reported warm and welcoming sponsors and employers who made their transition to American life relatively comfortable.<sup>7</sup>

While Fort Indiantown Gap served as a gateway for the thousands of Vietnamese and Cambodians who eventually settled in Pennsylvania, the site itself also serves as rich resource for understanding Pennsylvania’s more

<sup>3</sup> James T. Wooten, “Boredom Lengthens Refugees’ Days on Army Base,” *New York Times*, July 13, 1975, 30.

<sup>4</sup> “Processing of Refugees Speeded Up,” *New York Times*, May 31, 1975, 10.

<sup>5</sup> Karen De Witt, “Town Strives to Assist Refugees, but Strains of Resentment Show,” *New York Times*, July 15, 1979, 1.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 15.

recent immigrant past. Today, Fort Indiantown Gap's memorialization of its own history rests largely on its military past and connections to World War II; little is mentioned of the Vietnamese and Cambodian refugees who passed through. Accounts of European migration to Pennsylvania from the colonial era through the twentieth century abound, but through the stories of Vietnamese and Cambodians who stayed at Fort Indiantown, historians can begin to incorporate the experiences of Asian migrants—and, more specifically, refugees—into the timeline of Pennsylvania immigrant settlement.

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