Montagnards Find Home in North Carolina

Since 1986, the indigenous mountain people of Vietnam have been welcomed to the U.S. Led by a VFW member, a group in Asheboro, N.C., is trying to make the transition to a new life as smooth as possible.

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Blic Dacat labors daily clearing the dense Carolina pines and constructing fences from the wood he gets. He plants crops, burns brush and tends to the goats.

Some might mistake Dacat's abode for an abandoned farmhouse. For that matter, at first sight, Dacat appears to have no home at all — his clothes are stained and frayed, and his hands are dirty with soil and marred by scrapes from a hard day's work. Given where Dacat began, though, the North Carolina wilderness is a good home.

Dacat is 67 and always has a smile on his face.

During the Vietnam War, Dacat was a fierce jungle warrior. A Montagnard, Dacat belongs to the Koho tribe. He became a ranger with the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). When the Americans pulled out in 1973, the Montagnards, by necessity, continued to fight for survival.

At that time, Dacat believed that his wife, Kaba, and their two daughters were dead, as they were no longer in his village that had been destroyed. He thought there was nothing left to do but continue to fight.

Eventually, with thousands of other Montagnards, Dacat began a deadly trek across Cambodia. Years later, he arrived in Thailand with a group of more than 200 Montagnards.

They ended up in a refugee camp, where they were later rescued by American relief groups

in 1986. Dacat was given the option of moving to California or North Carolina.

For Dacat, the choice was easy — North Carolina was home to the Green Berets who fought alongside the Montagnards during the long war in Southeast Asia.

Today, Dacat lives at "The New Central Highlands," as they call their compound, outside Asheboro, N.C., where he can be found working alongside his wife.

Indeed, after Dacat settled in the U.S., word came from Vietnam that Kaba and their daughters were alive. It took many years, but in 2007, Dacat was reunited with his wife. His daughters, now grown with families of their own, had to stay behind.

Dacat has not seen his daughters since he went to fight during the Vietnam War. He has 11 grandchildren he has never met. One of his daughters is trying to get her family out of the country that has proven to be unforgiving to the mountain people.

Dacat's story is not uncommon among the Montagnards, who sacrificed their way of life and sometimes even their families to serve with the Americans during the Vietnam War.

Their loyalty to the U.S. is why the organization Save the Montagnard People Inc. (SMTP) was founded in 1986 by a group of former Green Berets. Originally known as General Coactive Montagnard Association Inc., the group was formed to help Montagnards assimilate to their new lives in the U.S.

But they do so much more.

'An Act of Love'

STMP President George Clark became involved with the group in 1998 and has made it his life's work. He became president in 2002.

He said he, like others, has spent countless hours lobbying and fighting "government bureaucracy" to get the repressed people out of Southeast Asia and to America.

"What continues to happen to these people is unthinkable," said Clark, who led Montagnards in Vietnam from 1967-70 with the 5th Special Forces Group Airborne, Nha Trang MIKE Force. "In 2008, 56 Montagnards were in a U.N. refugee camp in Cambodia. Somehow, they were given back to Vietnam, and guess what? None of them have ever been seen or heard from again."

When Clark and the other volunteers — no one involved with STMP has ever been paid — aren't advocating for their former allies, they are working at The New Central Highlands.

In 2003, STMP raised enough money to put a down payment on 100 acres of farmland

outside Asheboro. By 2006, members had donated $300,000 to pay off the mortgage and turned it over to the Montagnards.

“People didn’t want us out here,” Clark said. “It was mainly the people on the property next to us. But us old Special Forces guys deal with the bad people who come around.”

The land was cleared by the Montagnards. A replica longhouse is tucked away in the woods. Next to that is a 140-foot-by-40-foot Mnong house. Both are reminiscent of the type of homes the indigenous group had in Vietnam’s Central Highlands.

Local Montagnard children raised $8,000 for a soccer field that is located on a parcel of the acreage as well.

“Everything done out here has been done out of love for the Montagnards,” said Clark, a member of VFW Post 1957 in Hickory, N.C. “This is about preserving their culture. They are a proud people with a great deal of honor.”

A pavilion was built to host celebrations on holidays, such as Memorial Day and Dega Day (Montagnard day of remembrance). Nearby, another building houses tools for crafting jewelry and pottery, which is later sold.

Most importantly, Clark said, a traditional Montagnard cemetery has been constructed. The Asheboro VFW, which has since closed its doors, paid to have the land surveyed for it. STMP hopes to build a cross-shaped chapel adjacent to the cemetery.

“Back in Vietnam, the Vietnamese used to bulldoze the Montagnard cemeteries,” Clark said. “When the Montagnards would come out to defend their hallowed ground, they were killed. That’s why this cemetery means so much to them.”

Vietnam veteran Bill Cooper first learned about what was happening in North Carolina when he visited his daughter in Greensboro in 2002. He was living in New Jersey at the time. When he retired in 2006, he headed south and has been involved ever since.

“The situation with the Montagnards is very much like the American Indians,” Cooper said. “But no one knows about these people and what they did.”

He said in Vietnam, it’s rare to find longhouses, which is why the two longhouses at STMP are so important.

Cooper served in Vietnam as a helicopter crew chief from 1966-68, with the 117th Assault Helicopter HQ in the Central Highlands. He supported the 5th Special Forces and 101st Airborne. Cooper became a VFW member in 1967 while home on leave from Vietnam.

'Still Violating Human Rights'

North Carolina is home to about 5,000 Montagnards. Half of those live in Greensboro, with large populations in Charlotte and Raleigh.

A second wave of 400 Montagnards came to the U.S. in late 1992. In 2002, an additional 900 were re-settled in the "Tar Heel State."

Clark has made trips to Thailand and Combodia to try and "save" the Montagnards from "certain death."

For the most part, Clark said those who have resettled in North Carolina have adapted well. The Montagnard Dega Association (MDA) in Greensboro opened its doors in 1987 to help the newcomers assimilate to a new way of life.

Y'Siu Hlong, MDA executive director, came to the U.S. on Nov. 23, 1986. He said he was the first Montagnard to obtain his citizenship and the first Montagnard to get his college degree. He now is working on his Ph.D.

His journey to get to North Carolina was a long one. He spent 12 years fighting in the jungle and another five years on the Thailand border.

"In the jungle, we keep looking for the Americans," Hlong said. "But there were no Americans. We thought they would come back for us. We still had the heart and spirit. We want nothing more than to be here with our brothers."

Hlong said he believes there are about 23,000 Montagnards in the U.S., in states such as Washington, Texas, Florida, Hawaii and New York.

He cautioned that as Americans, we "have to think" before supporting Vietnam as a country.

"They are still violating human rights," Hlong said. "But everyone seems to forget that."

'We Died for Nothing'

The MDA/Montagnard American Organization (MAO) in Greensboro works closely with the Montagnard community.

H'Yua Liana Adrong is the administrative coordinator/vocational instructor with MDA and was a co-founder for MAO.

At MDA, Adrong helps refugees throughout Guilford County with employment and vocational training. She works on the language barrier and assists with citizenship classes.

"Our goal is to assist our clients in achieving self-sufficiency," said Adrong, who came to America with her family in 1996. "That includes being contributing members in their neighborhoods and communities and, ultimately, earning American citizenship."

Adrong, who earned her bachelor's degree in social work at the University of North Carolina-Greensboro, said MDA aims to promote higher education for the Montagnard youth community, while also preserving their culture.

Y Monah is one of the community members helped by the MDA. After making his way to Cambodia, where he survived a "bad" three years, he arrived in the U.S. in 2004.

"I got to see so many of my friends when I got here," he said through the assistance of Vung Ksor, who served as an interpreter.

In 2012, Monah had heart surgery and now has a pacemaker. He has no job, but wishes to work, and his wife has "severe" mental problems. He is 70; his wife is 69. They are now U.S. citizens.
Monah has vivid recollections of serving with the Americans in Vietnam.

He was handpicked because he was considered a border expert and spoke the right dialect. As a recon man for Green Berets, he would call in coordinates and often traveled to the Cambodian border.

In 1973, he joined ARVN to keep from getting killed. A year later, he was ordered to clear a road so that the communists could resupply their troops with ammo.

"I saw then all the Vietnamese acted the same," Monah said. "None of them, north or south, liked us Montagnards. That was a war between north and south. We died for nothing because we are nothing to them."

Monah was put in prison in 1975 for five years. He was later released, but the Vietnamese government was relentless, trying to catch him in a lie when he said he was just "trying to survive."

"If I hadn't escaped, I would be dead," Monah said.

'Happy to See My Friends'
Ksor is the Refugee Health Coordinator at the Center for New North Carolinians at the University of North Carolina-Greensboro.

Her father came to the U.S. in 2002 and Ksor followed in 2005, knowing only one word from her new country: "Hello."

She studied at Guilford College in Greensboro, where she earned her degree in community and justice studies. She is now working on a graduate degree in peace and conflict studies.

Ksor seeks out clients who are underserved and helps connect them with community resources. She makes appointments and acts as an interpreter for those who need it.

“God put me here for a reason,” Ksor said. “There are many elders in our community who have no family.”

Ykhiem Ayun is one of those elders. Ksor takes him to his doctor visits. He is basically homeless, living with a friend in a condemned apartment building.

At the MDA office, wearing sunglasses due to light sensitivity, Ayun shared his journey to America.

He took up arms in 1967 at age 14. His parents were “very old” and didn’t have enough money to let him go to school.

“The Vietnamese came for us and I ran,” Ayun said. “I said, ‘I don’t want to work for communists.’ I had two brothers killed.”

At 16, Ayun joined B-23 MIKE Force. He was wounded four times and carries a “good amount” of shrapnel in his body.

Ayun recalled seven days of intense fighting in June 1969. He said they took a lot of guns and “killed a lot of Vietnamese.” He was shot in the chest and remembers being “scared to death.”

In B-23, Ayun served under someone he called “Capt. Zachy.” He remembers the American as almost a family member.

“He was a good man,” Ayun said. “He loved the Montagnards. He wanted me to come to America. My dad had died, and I didn’t want to leave my mom. I would miss her. He looked at me like a little brother. I felt the same way.”

Ayun said at one point, the communists came again and tried to lure the Montagnards away to serve under them, but the mountain people evaded capture.

“We wanted to stand for our own people,” Ayun said. “Not them.”

From 1969-1975, he went into hiding. Years later, he was captured in Pleiku and arrested. In 1992, he was released and went back to what was left of his village.

He stayed there until 2001 when the communists came to interrogate him. He knew he had

to flee the village or risk getting killed. He made it to a U.N. camp in Cambodia. On June 24, 2002, he arrived in the U.S.

“I was very happy when I arrived here,” Ayun said. “So happy to see my friends I fought alongside.”

In 2014, Ayun had a stroke that left him unable to work. He is not eligible for assistance since he is not yet a U.S. citizen.

He gets $97 a month for food. And without his friend in the condemned apartment building, he would be living on the streets.

“He has been through so much and now he’s homeless,” Ksor said.

Clark, who has had his own bout of health scares recently, plans to continue his mission for as long as he can, but he hopes to eventually hand over the reins to the Montagnards since The New Central Highlands is for them. His wife, Phyllis, who spends much of her time volunteering with STMP, agrees. “They are great people, and they have the right to survive,” Phyllis said. “Their culture will survive on this land.” For more information on STMP, visit www.montagnards.org or email clark@rtmc.net.

Editor's Note: This is part two of a two-part story. Read part one here. *The article is featured in the April 2019 issue of VFW magazine, and was written by Janie Dyhouse, senior editor for VFW magazine.*