

Route One--Refugees' highway of misery

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South Vietnamese refugees fleeing Communist invasion stream south from Nha Trang along Highway One toward Cam Ranh Bay.

Route One—Refugees' highway of misery

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NHA TRANG, Viet Nam—Highway One. It is a highway of misery. A road too dangerous to travel, but choked nevertheless with every vehicle man has ever devised carrying sad, frightened faces south away from war.

Traffic does not move smoothly on Highway One. It can't. There are too many heavily overloaded buses—sometimes with 30 people perched precariously on their hoods and old, feeble men and

This story was filed Monday before the fall of Nha Trang to invading Communist forces.

headed, pulling wagons so full of people and furniture that their wheels are buckling.

And there are too many people on foot. Women smaller than most 10-year-old American boys, carrying more than one hundred pounds of their most cherished belongings on their backs. And, as they walk, they weep.

The road is agony. It seems a meeting place, a route, reserved only for the homeless, the tormented, the pitiful.

Its noises assault your senses. The screaming of women, shouts of angry men, the screech of tires, the roar of overheated motors, the bellowing of soldiers as they direct traffic and the all-too-frequent cracks of rifles as soldiers fire into the air to attract the attention of hordes of refugees who do not obey them.

Here, at a checkpoint just nine miles north of Nha Trang, soldiers have been ordered not to allow any more refugees to enter the city—an order few if any of the refugees like or understand.

"I HATE to do it," says the sweating major in charge, "but Nha Trang is already overflowing with 200,000 refugees and we just can't handle any more. These people are being diverted to Cam Ranh."

But Cam Ranh is at least another three hours away and many of the refugees have not eaten, stretched their legs, or slept for a day and night.

Somewhere there are several bursts of an M-16. There are shouts. A large truck has slipped off the road into a steep ditch and the 100 or so people packed into the back of it are screaming in terror.

"Let us out, let us out." Screaming children are thrown over the side into the arms of soldiers. An old woman drops out the back of the tilting truck like a limp rag. Her eyes stare unblinking at the sun. She is dead.

THE TERRIFIED people inside do not seem to care about the old woman. Several land on her body as they leap from the truck.

One hundred yards up the road a bus has broken down.

"You'll have to get out here," shouts a soldier carrying a bullhorn. "The bus is broken."

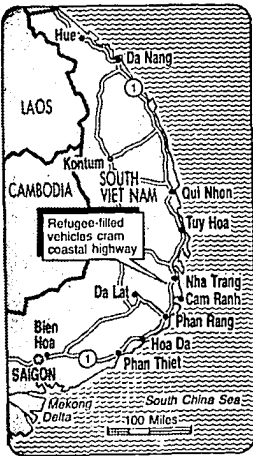
BUT THE PEOPLE refuse to budge, thinking perhaps that if they wait long enough, the bus will start running again.

"I said 'get out,'" the soldier shrieks. Still no movement. "If you don't get out you will all go to prison." Still no movement. "Out, dammit, get out." Still no movement. "alright this is your last chance." Then three soldiers point their M-16s at the bus windows which are filled with the frightened tear-streaked faces of women and children.

Then, in front of the bus, hidden from most of those inside, a soldier points his M-16 skyward and fires several

bursts. "Quick, get out," someone inside screams, "they are shooting at us, they are going to kill us all."

THE RUSE has worked all too well. Some children are pushed shrieking thru the open windows, others are trampled, glass breaks, the bus rolls and pitches like a ship in a storm, and 100 scratched, bleeding, terrified, and angry people are suddenly standing along the roadside with their belongings piled beside them.



Tribune Map

women lashed to their sides with rope because they are too weak to hang on.

There are too many trucks piled high with humanity, crammed full of refugees whose eyes stare out blankly from the dark boiling confines of cattle trucks so full people cannot stand up, turn around, or lie down. They have ridden that way for more than 18 hours.

THERE ARE too many motorcycles, barely able to pull carts filled with refrigerators, chairs, bicycles, women, and children. As they strain to climb the steep hills of Highway One just north of Nha Trang, they belch acrid blue smoke into the bright blue air.

There are too many miserable lathered horses, their mouths bleeding, their wretched cries for water un-