

'THE LONGEST NIGHT OF MY LIFE'



*but hope
lights the
darkness
for the
'Vietnam
Vicar'*

Pat Watson

reports

FOR the Rev. Patrick Ashe, Vicar of St. Mary's, Leamington, the night of Thursday, March 14, 1968, was "the longest night I have ever spent."

For twenty-five hours, caught in the time-gap between East and West, he was travelling home after eight days spent in Saigon, eight vital days which marked the culmination of a project which has made his home in Leamington the centre of nation-wide interest, with the 'phone constantly ringing and piles of mail from all over Britain arriving by every post.

"PROJECT VIETNAM ORPHANS" began, as such movements often do, in a small way. A meeting of eight men, members of a prayer and discussion group, was being held in the vicarage, and when Mr. Ashe went to fetch coffee during a break in the meeting, he found his wife shaken and distressed by the newsreels she had been watching on the television — newsreels which

For months investigations were made, on the spot in Saigon and at home here in Britain.

All legal and medical regulations were studied, snags were anticipated and dealt with. From about 30 applicants nurses Margaret Pearce and Anne Wyles were selected and by January this year they were ready to leave for Vietnam. Tremendous sympathy for the project had been aroused and over 500 homes had been offered for Vietnamese orphans. Money had begun to come in to support the project. Then fighting broke out again in and around Saigon, fiercer than ever. The airfield was closed, and the war which had brought suffering and starvation to the children of Vietnam was injuring them a second time, by holding back the aid they so desperately needed.

a helpless, homeless refugee in the middle of a savage and seemingly endless war.

New life

"Even in the better orphanages, the place is swarming with babies, three to a cot and with no-one who has time even to see that they get fed properly," he told us.

"There are hundreds of tiny babies, and the older ones don't learn to crawl like a normal baby does—crawl to its mother or to a toy—there are no toys or mothers there to give them the incentive to learn to move. They get skin rashes and boils, and there is no way to keep them dry and comfortable.

"In the orphanage I visited, they had had thousands of refugees living in the courtyard during the heavy fighting of recent weeks. They had been herded together, cooking on little stoves out in the open."



The Rev. Pat Ashe

showed the suffering of tiny children orphaned by the fierce fighting in Vietnam. When he rejoined the group, Mr. Ashe put a question to them.

"Can't we do something?" he asked. But it was not to remain a question. To think and pray about it even for a moment turned the words into a positive statement—we MUST do something! From then on, despite all the difficulties and discouragements, despite all the official form-filling and red tape, there was no looking back.

Practical

First, there were practical steps to take. It would be useless to duplicate work already being done by the big organisations like Oxfam and War on Want. Information was gathered in about all the forms of refugee work at present under way, and from this it was decided that there were two methods in which the members of the group could help.

One was to send out two nurses, to join in the work going on in Vietnam to help refugee children there. The other was to appeal for and select homes in this country where orphaned and abandoned children would be welcomed and adopted as members of the family. It sounds a simple, sane and urgent project, doesn't it? But as Mr. Ashe and his helpers were to find out, where war is involved, nothing is simple, nothing is sane.

Horrific

Then came frustrating weeks of waiting. The nurses were packed and ready to leave at a minute's notice, the first families had been selected for the earliest of the orphans to get through, offering homes ranging from Oban in Scotland to Scunthorpe, Weymouth, Torrington and Wales. Day followed day, with the newsreels becoming more horrific with every bulletin, and when finally the lull came, the question was, could the project go ahead as originally planned? Were circumstances still favourable, or was it all now completely hopeless? To answer those questions, Mr. Ashe decided on a personal visit to Vietnam.

"There were three main reasons for my journey," he explained on his return. "I went primarily to arrange what work the nurses would do in the first month or two of their stay, and I am very happy to have fixed up for them to join some French nuns who have one of the older orphanages in Saigon. There they can learn something of the language and customs of the Vietnamese and get used to the type of food eaten out there.

"One nurse is now working with the orphans and the other at the dispensary at a government day centre for mothers and children. My second reason was to arrange their accommodation, and I found this for them with a French family in Saigon. The final reason was to clear their arrival with the British Embassy. This, of course, only covers the beginning of their work, and later I think they will probably take part in the Vietnam Christian Service project, which is linked with the World Council of Churches and which will be much more challenging in its demands on them."

But though his arrangements had all gone smoothly and he had found everyone very sympathetic and anxious to help, the terrible suffering he had seen during his visit cast a cloud over his return. Being on the spot, Mr. Ashe explained, had brought home to him just what it means to be

For one baby boy, eight-months-old An, it is hoped a new life will begin again soon. His legal file has been opened, and in six months—"with luck!" commented Mr. Ashe wryly—he may be coming to Britain, the first baby sponsored by Project Vietnam Orphans, to join the home of Mr. and Mrs. John Nuttall, in Manchester.

John Nuttall is borough engineer of Radcliffe, and he and his wife are among the twenty chosen adopters selected from the long list of people whose warm hearts have been touched by the plight of these tragic little children. But, sadly, warmth and sympathy are not enough.

Money is needed—an estimated £6,000 a year once the project gets fully under way. Contributions, large or small, are desperately needed, and literature about the project is available if you want to organise a collection among your friends or at work, and speakers can be sent to address clubs and meetings.

If you can help in any way, get in touch now, either with Mr. Ashe at St. Mary's Vicarage, Leamington, with the secretary, Jeffrey R. Burgess, 1, Newgale Walk, Leamington, or with the treasurer, Ian Grant, at the Leamington branch of the Midland Bank Ltd. For little An, there is a gleam of hope ahead, but for hundreds and hundreds of others, the future is nothing but a long, dark night of poverty and suffering. "Project Vietnam Orphans" can bring the dawn a little nearer—with your help.