

The Navy's Role in the EVACUATION of VIETNAMESE REFUGEES

The role of the U.S. Navy in the rescue and evacuation of American and Vietnamese citizens from South Vietnam was a heroic and humanitarian endeavor. President Ford, in a message to the fleet via the Secretary of Defense, said of the evacuation:

"Please convey to all personnel involved in the Vietnam evacuation operation my appreciation and respect for their superb performance.

"This operation was carried out under extremely adverse conditions. Its smooth and orderly accomplishment reflects great credit upon the men and women who participated in its planning and execution.

"I also join with their comrades in mourning the loss of those gallant men who gave their lives in this humanitarian task. To their families and loved ones goes our deepest sympathy.

"Their sacrifices, as well as the courage and determination of all participating units, stand as a final example of the selfless dedication which has typified the performance of our armed forces throughout our involvement in Indochina.

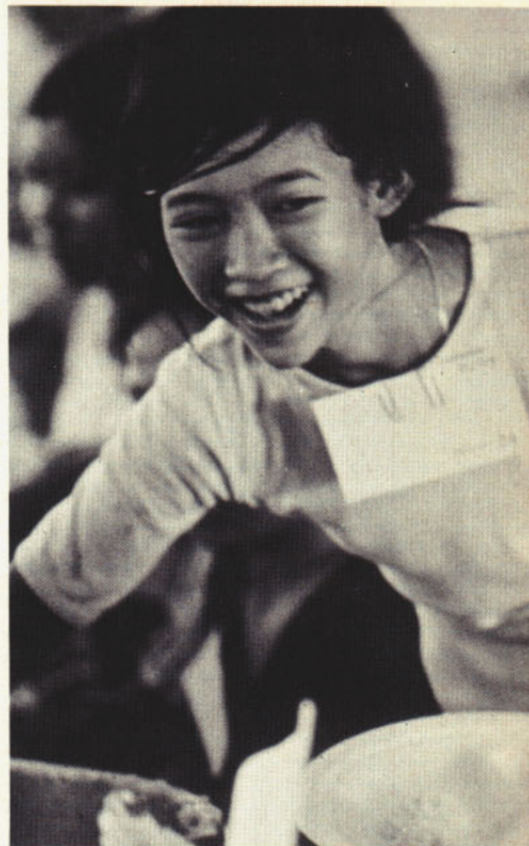
"They have my gratitude and that of the American people for the successful accomplishment of this difficult mission."

The untiring efforts of the Navy and Marine Corps personnel who assisted in that final exodus cannot be adequately summarized in a few short paragraphs. The whole story of the evacuation—of the ships and men who made it possible—will take weeks to tell because of the complexity of the operation and the number of people involved.

What follows is a series of capsule summations of "how it was" as seen mainly through the eyes of some people who were there.

First U. S. Ships To Pick Up Refugees

The amphibious cargo ship USS *Durham* was with the first U.S. Navy ships to pick up refugees. *Durham's* crew, both Navymen and Marines, worked day and night during the evacuation to bring aboard and care for more than 3800 refugees rescued near Phan Rang. Included among those rescued were some 80 which had been evacuated by USS *Frederick* and then transferred to *Durham*.



For two days and two nights, *Durham's* holds were transformed into makeshift dormitories for the homeless people. Food was specially prepared and medical teams treated the sick and wounded.

While the *Durham* crew cared for the refugees aboard their ship, *Frederick*, *Blue Ridge* and *Dubuque* did their part by providing food which they had aboard to U. S. Military Sealift Command merchant ships carrying thousands of other refugees. Foodstuffs were transferred by ships' boats and helicopters. The refugees had been forced to remain aboard the merchant ships for long periods because of lack of unloading facilities at the designated safe havens.

The crew of USS *Dubuque* was particularly instrumental in helping refugees at Phu Quoc. Her boats were used to not only transfer food and water to the helpless evacuees, but also to transport medical teams to the U. S. ships waiting to be offloaded.

Together the crews of these four ships, working virtually around the clock, saved many refugee lives which otherwise might have been lost.

Given a new lease on life, 3586 refugees were transferred on 5 April from the amphibious cargo ship *Durham* to *Trans Colorado*. The movement of the displaced persons to *Trans Colorado*, an American heavy lift merchant ship, was made off the coastal city of Vung Tau.

The transfer of Vietnamese, who were carried to safety, came after *Durham* spent Thursday and Friday taking evacuees aboard near Phan Rang.

Bleary-eyed and weak, the Vietnamese were given hot meals, shelter and emergency medical care aboard

Durham. Navy men and embarked Marines on the ship worked around the clock to tend to their needs. The transfer went smoothly as the revived evacuees were shuttled from the Seventh Fleet amphibious ship to the merchant vessel.

Before the transfer, the refugees received a hot meal and were provided a bag of rice to take with them. *Durham* also sent some canned foods and fruits to *Trans Colorado* to help feed the refugees. Each family thanked the American Navy men and Marines as they left *Durham*.

The *Durham* crew members continued to show their concern for the welfare of the refugees as they formed a human chain to help lift the Vietnamese and their belongings aboard *Trans Colorado*.

USS *Blue Ridge* also transferred some 11,000 meals to *Trans Colorado* for use by the evacuees from *Durham* and other refugees that were taken on later.

Helicopter Airlift Aboard *Blue Ridge*

All eyes turned to the horizon as two helos made their way to *Blue Ridge*. They were Air American helicopters, full of women, children and what few belongings they could gather together before fleeing Saigon. The passengers were unloaded and sent through evacuee processing stations set up on the main deck.

Facing page: Nhu-Dung, age 14, serves rice to fellow refugees at Asan, Guam. Photo by PH2 K. Hacka. Below: Vietnamese men carefully pass a child from boat to men of USS *Durham*, (LKA 114). Photo by PH3 H. Brown.



In order to make more room, another helicopter which had carried a Vietnamese pilot to safety was lifted from the main deck and flown a couple of hundred feet from *Blue Ridge*, where it was ditched.

Suddenly the sky seemed to be full of helicopters, all of them crammed with refugees.

With rotors turning, the second Air American helo prepared to return to Saigon for more evacuees. One of the hovering helos, only a few feet off, disregarded flight deck crewmen's orders to move away. Despite the efforts of the crewmen frantically waving their arms trying to ward the helo off, it continued toward the landing platform. At the last possible moment, the crew headed for cover, knowing what was going to happen. Shouts came from every direction, "Hit the deck! Hit the deck!" Sailors threw themselves over Vietnamese children, protecting them with their bodies.

The South Vietnamese craft set down on the very edge of the port side, but still there was not enough room. Rotor blades clashed together and exploded into thousands of pieces. The helo jumped and twisted viciously as pieces of the blades hit the flight deck. Some 30 *Blue Ridge* crewmen jumped up from the main deck and ran to the battered craft from which they began carrying children and helping the terror-stricken passengers to safety.

As soon as the deck was cleared, the other helicopters came in to unload their passengers. There was no room to keep helos aboard. As soon as they were unloaded, they were flown off the ship and ditched into the sea. Their doors were chopped off to allow the pilots an easy exit.

One Vietnamese pilot repeatedly faced death as he climbed into the cockpit of five copters in a row and dropped himself and the chopper into the sea. Each time, he was picked up by boat crews and returned to the ship.

If the helos weren't ditched, they were pushed over the side, breaking off antennas as they plunged into the sea. Throughout all of these events, it was a wonder that not one was injured. Yet not one pilot or any of the crewmen working on the main deck was hurt in the rescue operation.

All through the frantic landings and ditchings, the voice of the commanding officer, Captain William D. Hart, would come over the general announcing system and say, "You're doing a marvelous job. I'm proud of you all. Just remember to watch yourself, be careful and stay cool."

Over 40 ships and 70 helicopters took part in the world's largest helicopter evacuation. *Blue Ridge* was the hub of the massive airlift that brought thousands of Americans and Vietnamese out of the beleaguered city of Saigon.

Helping Hands: Preparations

"I can't say enough about the tireless and selfless efforts that our Navy men and Marines have expended to relieve the suffering of these people who have been forced to flee their homes," said Rear Admiral Donald B. Whitmire, evacuation coordinator.

That task began on Easter Sunday when ships of the Seventh Fleet Amphibious Force, responding to President Ford's directive to get aid to Vietnam refugees, sailed for the coastal country. USS *Blue Ridge* (LCC

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19) and USS *Dubuque* (LPD 8) sailed from Okinawa while USS *Durham* (LKA 114) and USS *Frederick* (LST 1184) got underway from Subic Bay in the Philippines.

Throughout the ships a special sense of purpose was evident as sailors and Marines carried out their duties. Commissarymen kneaded dough until the small hours of the morning as loaf after loaf of piping hot bread emerged from the ships' ovens. Hospital corpsmen inventoried medical supplies and stocked shelves.

Early Thursday afternoon, 3 April, the purpose of the voyage became a reality as a 20-foot South Vietnamese motor launch carrying 21 refugees plowed through the choppy seas toward *Durham*. The humanitarian mission was underway and from that moment it took on a meaning far deeper than any duty assignment could instill in that crew.

The first group of 21 refugees were hardly settled when a flood of their countrymen followed in sampans and junks. Boats of every size, shape and description converged on the amphibious cargo ship. Each was filled with men, women and children carrying what they could of their possessions. Old and young, some with suitcases or bundles, some clutching nothing but hope of a new life.

As *Durham* moved in closer to shore, she seemed to ignite a spark of hope into the hearts of the refugees. They crowded around the ship, and pandemonium reigned as boats jockeyed for position. American sailors stood on the accommodation ladder to help as the boats came alongside.

Getting the people aboard wasn't an easy task as the small craft rocked and rolled in the heavy seas. The occupants were all soaked to the skin—but they didn't seem to mind.

Military Sealift Command

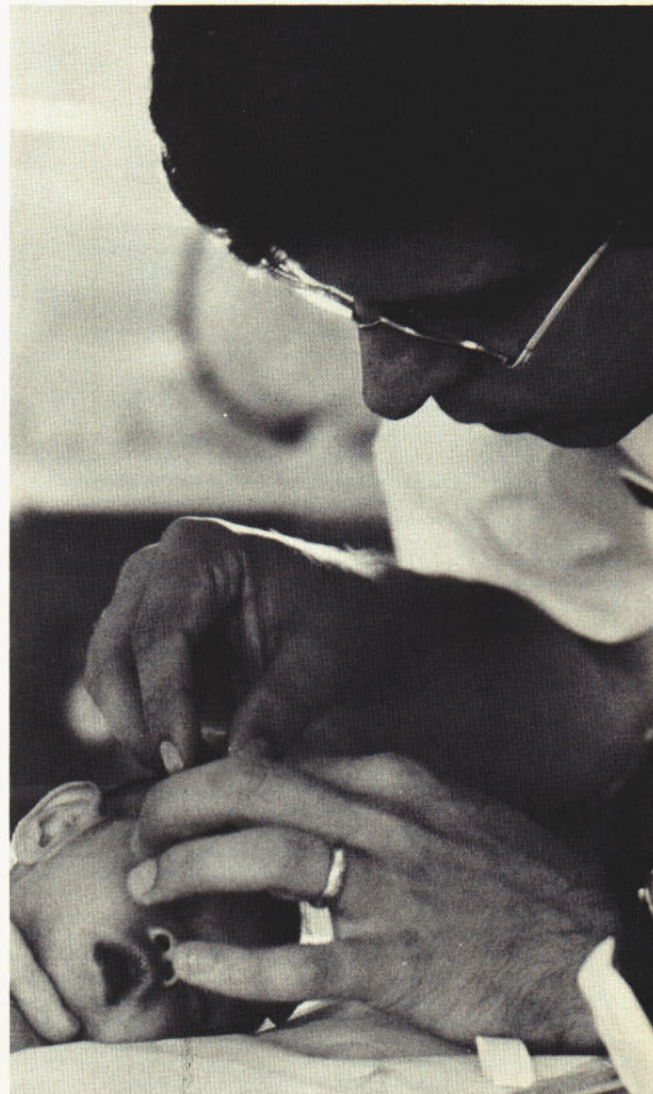
President Ford's order of 29 March for "American Naval Transports and Contract vessels to assist in the evacuation of refugees from the coastal seaports" of northern South Vietnam had an immediate effect on several ships under contract to the Navy's Military Sealift Command.

A small fleet of cargo ships, tugboats and barges operating near Vietnamese waters began an around-the-clock evacuation of refugees. Under difficult and hazardous conditions, the participating ships rescued thousands of South Vietnamese during the first days of operation.

SS *Pioneer Contender*, operating under an MSC contract, USNS *Sgt. Andrew Miller*, a Navy-owned transport, and SS *Trans Colorado*, a Sea Train Line ship, rescued more than 35,000 refugees from Da Nang alone.

The refugees were ferried from shore by tugs, barges

Counterclockwise, from left top: Boatswain's Mate 2nd Class T. Elsbree, USS *Durham*, takes care of Vietnamese baby while search is made for its mother who was separated from it during evacuation. Photo by PH3 H. Brown. Dr. Kenneth Cox administers to a Vietnamese baby. Photo by PH2 K. Hacka. Loon Keefer rests with her son, John, Jr., the first refugee baby born on Guam. Photo by PH2 K. Hacka. Grande Island and its refugee tent cities as seen from the air. The three tents in center are football-field size. Photo by PH1 S. Harris. Guided missile destroyer USS *Benjamin Stoddert*. Far right: A Vietnamese woman is escorted from helicopter across the deck of USS *Durham*. Photo by PH3 H. Brown.





and any other small craft available. Additionally, many more escaped aboard towed barges as the Communist forces moved ever closer on their trek down the coast.

USNS *Miller* rescued more than 15,000 refugees while USNS *Greenville Victory* transported 7000. By the end of the first week, nine MSC ships, four tugs and four Navy Amphibious Transports had been committed to the humanitarian evacuation.

The Ships That Helped

The U. S. Navy ships supporting the humanitarian evacuation and their mission:

- Evacuation/medical assistance and emergency supplies—USS *Durham* (LKA 114), USS *Dubuque* (LPD 8).

- Emergency supplies and medical assistance/care—USS *Blue Ridge* (LCC 19), USS *Vega* (AF 59), USS *Frederick* (LST 1184), USS *Benjamin Stoddert* (DDG 22), USS *Cochrane* (DDG 21).

MSC ships and ships under MSC contract involved and the number each evacuated:

USNS *Sgt. Andrew Miller*—15,300; USNS *Greenville Victory*—7000; SS *Pioneer Commander*—16,000; SS *American Challenger*—10,000; SS *Trans Colorado*—12,000; SS *Greenport*—7000; *Boo Heug Pioneer*—5000; *Chitose Maru*—2600.

Almost all refugees were transported from shore to ships by small vessels, tugs with barges in tow, and Korean LSTs. Other Navy and MSC ships which aided in the evacuation may have been omitted, because reports were not complete as ALL HANDS went to press.

Birth at Sea

On 3 May, two U. S. Navy hospital corpsmen delivered a baby boy aboard a refugee-packed ship en route to Grande Island in Subic Bay. Hospital Corpman 1st Class James Cooley and Hospital Corpsman 2nd Class Larry Lyons delivered the child beneath a makeshift



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shelter on the deck of USNS *Truman Kimbro*, a MSC ship.

"We were out in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, so there was nothing we could do but deliver," said Cooley. "We roped off a place on the port deck, cleaned it and put up ponchos for shade," explained the corpsman.

"The ship's sickbay was full and overflowing."

Lyons, who had never delivered a baby before, just followed Cooley's instructions and "took things as they came." "The childbirth kind of made the trip special as far as I'm concerned," said Lyons. "It made me feel real good to see the mother and baby all right."

Last Warship to Leave Vietnam

The last U. S. Navy warship to leave Vietnam arrived in Subic Bay, Republic of the Philippines, on 6 May, carrying 177 South Vietnamese refugees. Among the refugees aboard USS *Benjamin Stoddert* were remnants of the crew of a South Vietnamese navy gunboat.

"We received an SOS from a PGM (gunboat) that said they were out of fuel and leaking badly," said the ship's captain, Commander Peter Hekman. "When we found the boat in the Gulf of Siam, it was in bad shape." Six officers, one woman, four children and eight enlisted sailors were aboard.

After this rescue, the Pearl Harbor-based destroyer spied a fishing boat in the South China Sea. Its occupants, 158 people of whom 80 were young children, were out of fuel and food. *Stoddert* took them aboard





and proceeded to the American naval base in Subic Bay.

Building a Process Center

During the height of the massive airlift, almost 5000 evacuees arrived on Grande Island in the mouth of Subic Bay. They were housed in tents and the island's few cabins while being processed for eventual entry into the U. S.

Before the Vietnamese refugees arrived, Marines and Seabees erected hundreds of tents, built a chain link security fence, installed security lights and built almost 200 toilets on Grande Island. The massive undertaking was a part of Operation New Life and Project Frequent Winds, the evacuation and processing of Americans and Vietnamese.

The Battalion Landing Team (BLT) 1/4 Marines, based at Okinawa, and the Seabees from CBMU 302, based at Subic Bay, and Port Hueneme, Calif.-based Naval Construction Battalion 40 worked side by side throughout the operation.

Tent City

The concerted efforts of military and civilian volunteers from all over Guam were responsible for erecting "Tent City," formerly Orote Point, Guam. Working for two straight days without rest, Navy Seabees drove more than 18,000 tent stakes through the coral layer, just three inches below the island's surface. The result was the erection of more than 1000 14-man tents which housed civilian volunteers, military personnel, Red Cross workers and 6000 Vietnamese refugees.

While Seabees erected temporary housing, a portable kitchen fed 1000 persons an hour and Red Cross workers assisted refugees in contacting and receiving telegrams from their relatives and sponsors located around the globe.

Nine teams of 50 Seabees each worked nonstop to erect the facilities on the island. Their humanitarian efforts were part of Operation New Life—the military coordinated feeding, housing and clothing of Vietnamese evacuees—under the command of Admiral Noel A. M. Gayler, Commander in Chief, Pacific.

This roundup of what happened in the Vietnam evacuation is by no means all-inclusive. There are hundreds of incidents deserving of mention that simply can't be included in this account owing to the limitations of space. In future issues of ALL HANDS we hope to cover in more detail the role of the Navy in this spectacular effort.

—Story by the journalists and public affairs officers who served during the evacuation. Collected and coordinated by JO2 Dan Wheeler.



Facing page left: "Tent City" at Orote Pt., Guam, springs to life as thousands of South Vietnamese refugees set up housekeeping. Photo by PH3 S. Stuart. Facing page top: After 49 hours of work, a weary sailor seeks respite among a pile of tents in an abandoned field now coming to life with more than 6000 refugees. Photo by PH3 S. Stuart. Left: Vietnamese refugees aboard a landing craft from USS Durham, en route to merchant marine ship Trans Colorado. Photo by PH3 H. Brown. Above: Refugees serve refugees in a field kitchen at Asan, Guam. Photo by PH2 K. Hacka.