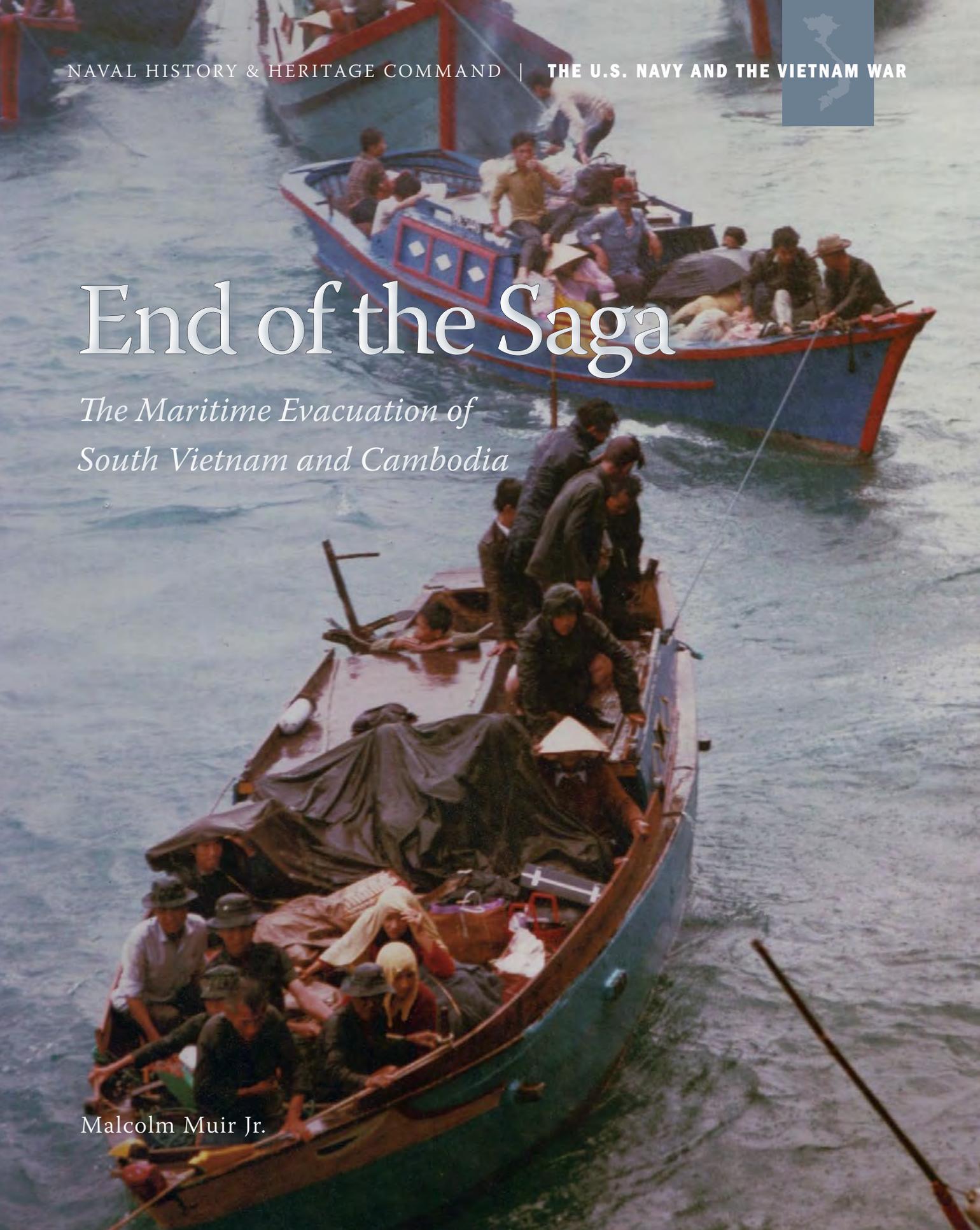




End of the Saga

*The Maritime Evacuation of
South Vietnam and Cambodia*

Malcolm Muir Jr.



THE U.S. NAVY AND THE VIETNAM WAR

Edward J. Marolda and Sandra J. Doyle, *Series Editors*

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NAVAL HISTORY AND HERITAGE COMMAND
DEPARTMENT OF THE NAVY
WASHINGTON, DC

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Printed in the United States of America.

Published by

Naval History & Heritage Command

in partnership with the Naval Historical Foundation

805 Kidder Breese Street SE

Washington Navy Yard, DC 20374-5060

www.history.navy.mil

Book design by Dean Gardei and Alan Wallace

U.S. GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL EDITION NOTICE



Use of ISBN

This is the official U.S. Government edition of this publication and is herein identified to certify its authenticity. Use of 978-0-945274-92-6 is for the U.S. Government Publishing Office Edition only. The Superintendent of Documents of the U.S. Government Publishing Office requests that any reprinted edition clearly be labeled as a copy of the authentic work with a new ISBN.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Muir, Malcolm, 1943– author.

Title: End of the saga: the maritime evacuation of South Vietnam and Cambodia/Malcolm Muir Jr.

Other titles: Maritime evacuation of South Vietnam and Cambodia

Description: First edition. | Washington Navy Yard, DC: Naval History & Heritage Command, in partnership with the Naval Historical Foundation,

[2017] | Series: The U.S. Navy and the Vietnam War | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017010035 | ISBN 9780945274926 (alkaline paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Vietnam War, 1961–1975—Naval operations, American. | Vietnam War, 1961–1975—

Evacuation of civilians—Vietnam (Republic) | Vietnam War, 1961–1975—Evacuation of civilians—

Cambodia. | Refugees—Vietnam (Republic)—History—20th century. | Refugees—Cambodia—History—20th

century. | United States. Navy—History—Vietnam War, 1961–1975. | Vietnam

War, 1961–1975—Campaigns.

Classification: LCC DS558.7 .M84 2017 | DDC 959.704/345—dc23 LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017010035>

<<https://lcn.loc.gov/2017010035>>

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For sale by the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Publishing Office

Internet: bookstore.gpo.gov; Phone: toll free 866-512-1800; DC area 202-512-1800; Fax 202-512-2104

Mail Stop: IDCC, Washington, DC 20402-0001

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Indochina

INTRODUCTION

As the decades-long struggle in Southeast Asia came to a climax in the spring of 1975, the United States Navy and Marine Corps saved thousands of U.S. citizens and pro-American Vietnamese and Cambodians from victorious Communist forces. To the American public, the precipitate withdrawal of the United States from Cambodia, and especially South Vietnam, presented the disconcerting spectacle of the abandonment of allies and, on a more human level, of a host of individuals who had worked and fought for common aims. Yet behind the undeniably tragic elements of the picture, the evacuations highlighted the skill and courage of American uniformed personnel in the midst of chaos.

Setting the stage for this last act in one of America's longest wars was the Paris Agreement of 27 January 1973. Engineered by President Richard M. Nixon and Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger, this treaty offered the United States "peace with honor" by bringing home American prisoners of war and ending combat operations for the U.S. armed forces.

Under terms of the accord, only vestigial remnants of the American expeditionary force would stay in South Vietnam to provide training for that country's armed forces. By 1974, about 8,500 U.S. personnel remained as "civilian" advisers, with 5,000 contracted to maintain South Vietnamese military equipment.

For America's allies in the region, the Paris Agreement called for elections (that were never held) and a cease-fire. This latter provision meant slightly more than 100,000 North Vietnamese troops remained in South Vietnam. To placate the uneasy South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu, the Nixon administration secretly offered assurances that if the Communists broke the accord, the United States would intervene with force as it had done in 1972 when American air and naval forces played a critical role in turning back the North Vietnamese Easter Offensive.



NHHC/VN Collection

Despite their smiles, South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu and U.S. President Richard M. Nixon strongly disagreed over the best way to end the conflict in Vietnam.

In a comparison of forces following the Paris Agreement, the Saigon government held a strong hand. The Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) numbered 650,000 regular and regional soldiers, with most units well equipped with American weapons. The Vietnam Air Force (VNAF) was, by some estimates, the fourth largest in the world. The Vietnam Navy (VNN), in terms of sheer numbers of combatant ships (97), ranked among the top ten fleets of the world. Unfortunately, as skeptics had foreseen, the tenuous Paris Agreement quickly unraveled. Anticipating war, both sides set out to secure and enlarge the territories they already held. In Laos, Hanoi-led forces, including the indigenous Pathet Lao, continued their offensive against the Royal Laotian government. In Cambodia, the ARVN launched a large campaign. When this failed, the radical Cambodian Communists (Khmer Rouge) waged an increasingly successful attack on the Phnom Penh government of Lon Nol, whose regime by late 1974 was able to hold little more than the capital itself.

Moreover, political turmoil swirled in the United States around the Watergate affair. The scandal involved Nixon's direction of illegal activities and



Courtesy Gerald R. Ford Library

At a White House meeting in March 1975, President Gerald R. Ford Jr. (foreground) confers with U.S. Ambassador to South Vietnam Graham A. Martin (left), Army Chief of Staff General Frederick C. Weyand, and Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger over the deteriorating situation in Vietnam.

his concerted effort to cover up those crimes for which he was compelled to resign from office in August 1974. The odium of Watergate compromised the ability of the executive branch under President Gerald R. Ford to take forceful measures in the event of a major Communist offensive in Southeast Asia. Congress reflected the American public's weariness with the war and it became more assertive in cutting back on funding for Southeast Asian military forces. Many Americans also considered the governments of South Vietnam and Cambodia corrupt and wasteful. The oil crisis of 1973 and subsequent inflationary pressures on the U.S. economy intensified calls for the Ford administration to slice aid going to South Vietnam and Cambodia.

The Communist leadership in Hanoi, emboldened by Nixon's resignation and realizing direct U.S. intervention was not likely, took aggressive steps to exploit the situation. In 1974, North Vietnamese forces began widening and paving the Ho Chi Minh Trail; they even constructed a pipeline from North Vietnam into South Vietnam's Central Highlands. By the end of the year, the North Vietnamese

almost doubled their troop strength in the south to 200,000. On the ground, the Communists probed more vigorously, scoring a major success with their seizure and occupation of Phuoc Binh northeast of Saigon. In January, the North Vietnamese overran the entire province of Phuoc Long.

As Communist forces in South Vietnam became more aggressive, the Thieu government began planning to withdraw ARVN units from its northern provinces and concentrate them around main population centers, especially Saigon and Danang. But to avoid provoking a panic, South Vietnamese authorities took few concrete steps to implement their fallback preparations.

As the fortunes of American-backed regimes in Southeast Asia spiraled downward in 1974, U.S. planners drew up a series of options for withdrawing American citizens and local supporters. These plans, as they evolved, offered U.S. leaders a wide menu of choices, ranging from flights by civilian air carriers or military fixed-wing aircraft to embarkation aboard civilian and naval ships to the more extreme measure of helicopter evacuation.

timetable for offensive action. Also complicating the picture was the byzantine command structure of the American armed forces in the region. One key individual was Air Force Lieutenant General John J. Burns, commander of U.S. Support Activities Group (USSAG), the remnant of the Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV). Headquartered at Nakhon Phanom, Thailand, Lieutenant General Burns was subordinate to Admiral Maurice F. Weisner, Commander in Chief, U.S. Pacific Command (CINCPAC) in Hawaii. But Lieutenant General Burns, dual-hatted as head of the Seventh Air Force, was also responsible to the commander of the Pacific Air Forces (PACAF), headquartered in the Philippines. Such a set-up seemed to guarantee confusion at the most inopportune moments.

The sea service tools available to these leaders looked, at least on paper, adequate for the task ahead. The Marines held ready the 9th Marine Amphibious Brigade, comprising Regimental Landing Team 4 backed by aircraft, logistics, and evacuation security forces. In late March, the landing team was located in Japan but soon moved to Okinawa. In the second week of April, it moved to Subic Bay in the Philippines. There, it embarked on naval ships, with the brigade headquarters aboard the amphibious command ship *Blue Ridge* (LCC-19). Navy planners increased the assets available to the commander of the Seventh Fleet, in part by delaying the scheduled return to the U.S. West Coast of the battle group built around the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier *Enterprise* (CVAN-65), as well as one amphibious squadron. Thus, four carriers were on station by the end of March rather than the usual three. Two amphibious squadrons— rather than one—stood ready. Augmenting sealift capabilities were eight ships controlled by the Military Sealift Command (MSC).

While the numbers of these forces were impressive, the quality of American military units, of whatever service, was suspect by 1975. The long Vietnam War had engendered disdain for the military in some American circles. During the closing stages of the conflict, drug and alcohol usage in Southeast Asia attracted such attention that the Navy ran



NHHC VN Collection

The nuclear-powered aircraft carrier *Enterprise* (CVAN-65) with her air wing of 75 combat aircraft steams off Indochina in the 1970s. Concerned about developments in Southeast Asia in the spring of 1975, Washington delayed the ship's scheduled return to the United States.

several large urinalysis screenings of Sailors and Marines. Although fewer than 0.5 percent tested positive, anecdotal evidence suggested the true figure was much higher.

Adding to the Navy's contemporary problems were racial divisions. Festering aboard many Navy ships, these problems led to violence on several in the fall of 1972, including riots aboard the aircraft carrier *Kitty Hawk* (CVA-63) and the fleet oiler *Hassayampa* (AO-145). Following a sit-down strike on the aircraft carrier *Constellation* (CVA-64), Admiral Elmo R. Zumwalt Jr., the Chief of Naval Operations, concluded "racism was endemic in the entire structure of the Navy." To help relieve tensions, the admiral established racial awareness, equal opportunity, and other programs. Zumwalt's successor as CNO in 1974, Admiral James L. Holloway III, continued the most successful of these initiatives.



NHHC VN Collection

The oiler *Hassayampa* (AO-145) makes its way through the South China Sea. Racial trouble on board this ship as well as the carriers *Kitty Hawk* (CVA-63) and *Constellation* (CVA-64) during the last years of the Vietnam War led some observers to doubt the Navy's operational capability.



Courtesy The San Diego Union and Evening Tribune via the San Diego Historical Society

Sailors raise their fists during a protest gathering in San Diego prior to *Constellation's* scheduled deployment to the Western Pacific.



NHHC Vietnam Collection

Admiral Elmo R. Zumwalt Jr., Chief of Naval Operations from 1970 to 1974, speaks with Sailors. Zumwalt and his successors made a concerted and ultimately successful effort to improve race relations in the service.



South Vietnamese soldiers, marines, and civilians fill every available space on the deck and superstructure of SS *Pioneer Contender* during the exodus from South Vietnam's I and II Corps.

THE COLLAPSE IN I AND II CORPS

The capability of America's armed forces would be tested to the utmost in the spring of 1975. Operation Frequent Wind planning became urgent as the South Vietnamese armed forces fell apart under the pressure of the 1975 Communist offensive. Hanoi planners had anticipated victory in 1976; they were surprised at the rapidity of the South Vietnamese collapse in 1975. Three North Vietnamese divisions opened the offensive on 10 March against Ban Me Thuot. After hard fighting, the Communists seized the city on 12 March. An ARVN counterattack failed. South Vietnamese troops, in an ominous development, began to desert in droves. Two days later, President Thieu ordered withdrawal from the Central Highlands. Despite stout resistance by some ARVN soldiers, too many units panicked. U.S. Army Chief of Staff General Frederick C. Weyand told President Ford, "This strategy was sound in concept, and Thieu's estimate of its necessity was correct. Its execution, however, was disastrous."

Hanoi, surprised that confusion and chaos reigned in the South, moved quickly to take advantage of the situation. On 19 March, Communist troops opened another offensive just south of the Demilitarized Zone; six days later they entered Hue. By the end of March, Communist troops occupied one-quarter of South Vietnam and inflicted more than 150,000 casualties on the ARVN, as well as destroyed one-half of Saigon's combat aircraft. One demoralized Saigon official compared the fall of provincial capitals to "an avalanche."

The retreat became a debacle. Six of the 13 ARVN divisions simply disintegrated. Throngs of refugees, estimated by U.S. Ambassador Graham A. Martin in Saigon at more than half a million, flocked to the coastal cities. As the South Vietnamese military effort collapsed into impotence and chaos, ad hoc relief efforts begun by the Vietnam Navy encountered the most appalling conditions. Already hamstrung by budget cuts of 80 percent during the

preceding three years, Vietnamese naval officers concluded in March 1975 that only 31 (one destroyer escort, six cutters, five minesweepers and patrol craft, fourteen landing craft, and five oilers) of their 45 large ships were ready to embark refugees. Shortages abounded in everything from ammunition to fuel to toilet paper.



NHHC Vietnam Collection

The Vietnam Navy warship *Tham Ngu Lao* (HQ-15), a former U.S. Coast Guard high-endurance cutter, approaches the pier as a South Vietnamese sailor secures the bow line. Cutbacks in U.S. military assistance after 1973 severely constrained Vietnam Navy operations.

To assist in the evacuation, representatives of the remnant American military presence in South Vietnam, called the Defense Attaché Office (DAO) Saigon, and requested Military Sealift Command to dispatch surface ships to the port city of Danang. MSC responded with four cargo ships, five tugs, and seven barges, the latter to ferry refugees from shore to the deep-draft cargo vessels.

VNN Captain Nguyen Xuan Son, 1975

IN THE SPRING OF 1975, CAPTAIN NGUYEN XUAN SON commanded the Fleet Command of the Vietnam Navy. Less than two months after his country's fall, Captain Son was interviewed by Dr. Oscar P. Fitzgerald of the Naval Historical Center (renamed Naval History and Heritage Command in 2008). As an eyewitness to the withdrawal of ARVN forces from the northern provinces of the Republic of Vietnam, Captain Son gave an unflinching account of often chaotic conditions during the evacuation around Danang.



NHHC Vietnam Collection

Captain Nguyen Xuan Son (second from the left), Commander of the Vietnam Navy Fleet Command, discusses operations with Rear Admiral James B. Wilson (left), the last Commander Naval Forces Vietnam, and other officers in 1973.

Q. (Dr. Fitzgerald) Was the navy's role in the I Corps mainly gunfire support?

A. (Captain Son) Gunfire support and later on evacuation. Most of the evacuation was done on our ships. . . . It all happened so fast. I could see Danang fall with my own eyes from the navy headquarters on Observatory Island. . . . When we met the [South Vietnamese] marines at the rendezvous point, we didn't have enough ships for everyone so the marines loaded first and the marines stopped the other units from coming in [to the ships], so most of the army's 3rd Division was picked up by the second load. . . . The troops' morale was very low.

Q. Was this true of the other divisions?

A. That's true of everybody. With the withdrawal from Danang and the northern provinces, I think the marines did the best fighting and had the highest

morale. They had their individual weapons and carried them . . . when they boarded our ships even after swimming through the water and climbing up the ladder. But other units, some of them . . . just threw their weapons away.

Q. Did the navy have any losses up there in that area?

A. We lost one of our LCUs [utility landing craft] and I, myself, was shot down in a helicopter, but I got away and was picked up by the marine chief of staff. It was a funny thing. I was shot down with the commanding general of the 1st Division. I flew with him up to Tan My just to supervise the withdrawal of his troops. We were shot down and the pilot was calling for rescue. By luck there was the air force helicopter with the marine chief of staff aboard. He was flying to deliver dehydrated rice and other food to his troops. He was trying to get these supplies to his troops. He heard our call for help and flew in to pick us up.

Q. Were you actually behind the lines?

A. Yes.

Q. Was it a close call?

A. Oh yes . . .

Q. Was the evacuation pretty orderly? Once they got to the beach, were you able to control the flow of the people from piling on the ships?

A. The marines did well, very well, on boarding the ship, but the 1st Division was no good. With the 2nd Division we had a terrible experience. They were in Chu Lai. . . . We brought the LST in to shore, the bow door opened and there were about 10,000 people on the beach. People were jamming onto the ship and there were some people . . . on the backside of the ship throwing grenades and using M79 grenade launchers exploding right on the bow ramp, killing a lot of people.

Q. Did the troops do this?

A. The troops did this to make room for themselves.

Q. Did you have orders to take the troops out first and then the civilians or did you pick up everybody who was there?

A. The order was civilians first and troops later. But who could enforce the order? Everybody had a gun and they were fighting for their own life.

On 29 March, the Department of Defense designated CINCPAC Admiral Weisner as the Vietnamese refugee evacuation coordinator. That same day, MSC vessels began loading refugees amidst scenes of increasing collapse. At Danang, as

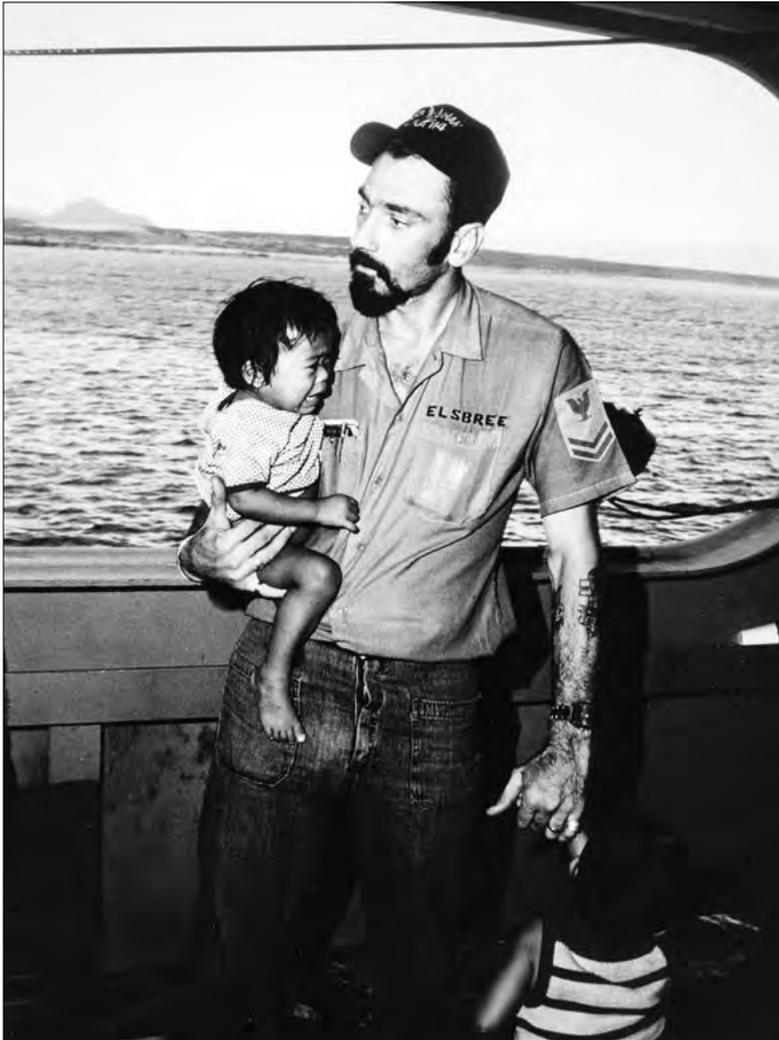
recalled, “Tens of thousands of government troops and refugees piled onto the piers, pushing and shoving, trampling some of their numbers to death, knocking others into the water. Thousands more tried to wade out to the ships, preventing them from getting close enough to dock.”

As frantic refugees swam out to the vessels, North Vietnamese artillery took them under fire. The cargo ship USNS *Sgt. Andrew Miller* (T-AK-242) and the chartered tug *Chitose Maru* departed the port for Cam Ranh Bay with more than 10,100 refugees aboard. The next day, MSC’s cargo ship SS *Pioneer Commander* weighed anchor packed with more than 8,000 people. On 31 March, cargo ships SS *Pioneer Contender*, SS *Transcolorado*, and three tugs followed, bringing the number of evacuees from Danang to 34,600 in three days. Many others were left quayside for lack of room.

Despite the air of incipient chaos, some Vietnam Navy units performed well. One tank landing ship (LST) that usually carried a maximum of 1,000 troops, was packed with 6,000 people. So crowded was another vessel that its crew could not use the ship’s weapons against shore targets because of the press of people surrounding the guns. Captain Nguyen Xuan Son, the last commander of the Vietnam Navy’s Fleet Command, recalled, “On my flagship, we had 2,500 marines on

the ship, a WHEC [high-endurance cutter], which normally carried a crew of 118 men.”

Cam Ranh Bay proved the most transitory of stops. As the situation worsened ashore, evacuation of that facility began 1 April with the departure of *Transcolorado* loaded with 7,000 refugees. For more



NHHC VN Collection

Boatswain’s Mate 2nd Class Truman Elsbree, a *Durham* Sailor, holds onto two Vietnamese children during the chaotic evacuation of refugees from northern and central Vietnam in the spring of 1975.

dense fog and low tide kept the rescue ships offshore, ARVN resistance crumbled. One Vietnamese naval officer observed, “They were abandoning all their tanks along the road, and none of the soldiers had any weapons. When they arrived here, they . . . threw them aside even with no enemy attack.” Another

than a week, these tragic scenes were repeated as a motley array of craft worked their way down the South Vietnamese coast, picking up refugees at ports such as Qui Nhon and Nha Trang. By 11 April, five chartered and two government-owned ships carried nearly 113,000 refugees to supposedly safer areas in the southern part of the country. The operation, characterized by one observer as “perhaps the most difficult in almost 26 years of MSC history,” was dogged with problems. The most basic supplies were scarce, the ability of the ships’ masters to keep order was tenuous, and command authority higher up the chain remained nebulous. Vice Admiral George P. Steele, commander of the Seventh Fleet that operated in the Western Pacific, complained he had no control over the MSC merchantmen.



Vice Admiral George P. Steele. The dynamic commander of U.S. Seventh Fleet oversaw the successful evacuation of tens of thousands of Americans, Vietnamese, and Cambodians from Indochina in the spring of 1975.

Without security parties aboard the rescue craft, anarchy often reigned, especially when the final destination of the refugee vessels— islands off the tip of South Vietnam—became known. The largest of these, Phu Quoc, lacked the most basic amenities, indeed even such necessities as food and water for the tens of thousands of refugees.

Early on 4 April, these problems reached a head when the master of USNS *Greenville Victory*

(T-AK-237) reported his ship, bursting at the seams with an estimated 10,000 people, had been taken over by some of the refugees on board. He had been told to alter course from Phu Quoc to Vung Tau, close to Saigon. Reacting to this emergency, the nuclear-powered cruiser *Long Beach* (CGN-9) and the destroyer escort *Reasoner* (DE-1063) hurried to intercept *Greenville Victory* to ensure the safety of its crew and passengers. Shortly thereafter, Marine detachments boarded USNS and MSC ships trans-



Sailors from the amphibious transport dock *Dubuque* (LPD-8) pass boxes of food and other supplies up the brow of SS *American Challenger*, anchored off Phu Quoc with thousands of desperate refugees on board.

porting refugees with orders to weed out enemy agents and to disarm all refugees, many of whom were South Vietnamese soldiers still carrying their rifles and grenades. The Marines restored order, and by 7 April, conditions for the refugees finally improved with the provision of ample food and medical supplies. By 10 April, the 72,000 people on Phu Quoc had been transferred to Vung Tau.



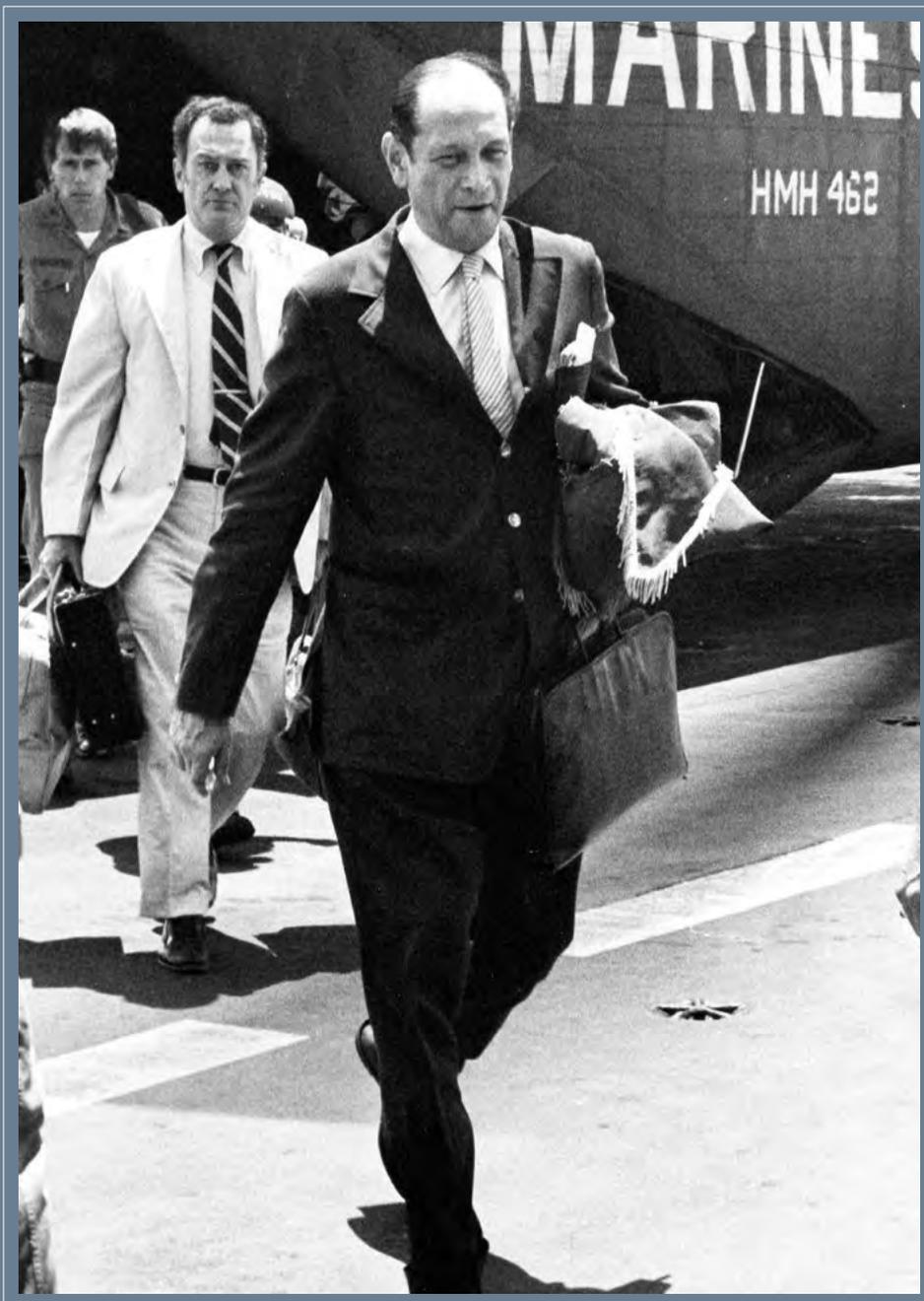
NHHC VN Collection

The nuclear-powered guided-missile cruiser *Long Beach* (CGN-9) operating in the South China Sea. The warship raced to intercept SS *Greenville Victory* when South Vietnamese troops threatened the ship's crew in March 1975.



NHHC VN Collection

U.S. Marines board SS *Pioneer Contender* to establish order.



NHHC VN Collection

John Gunther Dean, the U.S. ambassador to Cambodia, arrives on board *Okinawa* (LPH-3) during Operation Eagle Pull.

THE FINAL CURTAIN IN CAMBODIA

While the North Vietnamese pushed deep into South Vietnam, in Cambodia the Communist Khmer Rouge closed in on the capital Phnom Penh. American commands, principally, CINCPAC and Commander, U.S. Support Activities Group/Seventh Air Force, had since February 1975 been planning for the city's evacuation, dubbed Operation Eagle Pull. Now in early April, Navy and Air Force staffs refined their plans. When it became clear helicopter evacuation would be essential for withdrawing embassy personnel and Cambodian government leaders, Lieutenant General Burns' staff assembled about 20 large Air Force Sikorsky HH-53 Super Jolly Green Giant helicopters in Thailand. Augmenting these aircraft were 12 Sikorsky CH-53 Sea Stallions of Marine Heavy Helicopter Squadron 462 (HMH-462) flying from the amphibious assault ship *Okinawa* (LPH-3) and the attack carrier *Hancock* (CVA-19), just dispatched to the Gulf of Thailand. Revealing once again the flexibility inherent in carrier operations, *Hancock* swapped half her fixed-wing air group for a second Marine heavy helicopter squadron, HMH-463.

In mid-March, Navy planners had considered using an attack carrier like *Hancock* as a helicopter carrier. Arguments against such a measure included the serious (or total) reduction in the strike capability of the ship plus the extraordinary maintenance and supply requirements posed by the newly embarked helicopters. These points led the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) initially to reject the option, but when the count of potential evacuees from the Cambodian capital almost doubled from 666 to 1,172, the JCS ordered an attack carrier with Marine CH-53 helicopters aboard to deploy to Subic Bay. *Hancock* deployed to the Philippines with 16 CH-53Ds, 16 Boeing Sea Knight CH-46Ds, 4 Bell Super Cobra AH-1Js, and 2 Bell Iroquois/Huey

UH-1Es, plus a Marine battalion landing team (BLT 1/9) of about 480 men. Two Navy officers conversant with amphibious helicopter operations (an air department head and a flight deck officer) flew from the United States to *Hancock*. Modifications to the ship were easily effected. Sailors painted helicopter spots on the flight deck and provided needed supplies to the Marine unit.

Waiting for *Hancock* was *Okinawa*, a ship that had been on station in the Gulf of Thailand since early March. Aboard that amphibious assault ship was the 31st Marine Amphibious Unit comprising



NWHC VN Collection

The amphibious assault ship *Okinawa*, carrying a complement of Marine CH-53 Sea Stallion helicopters, steams through the South China Sea in March 1975.

350 Marines of BLT 2/4 and 12 CH-53 helicopters. A small advance Marine team designated a soccer field close to the U.S. Embassy at Phnom Penh as the landing zone.

When U.S. Ambassador to Cambodia John Gunther Dean ordered the execution of Eagle Pull, Air Force personnel landed in Phnom Penh on 12 April to coordinate the arrival of the ground security force, composed of 346 Marines of BLT 2/4. The Marines set up a perimeter and then helicopters from *Okinawa* flew 287 evacuees,

The Stalwart Sea Stallion

THE SIKORSKY CH/HH-53 SEA STALLION PROVED

to be a workhorse aircraft for the evacuations from Cambodia and South Vietnam as well as for the operation to recapture SS *Mayaguez*. Originally developed for the U.S. Marine Corps, the Sikorsky heavy-lift helicopter powered by two turboshaft engines made its first flight in October 1964. The CH-53 was designed with an internal lift capability of 8,000 pounds, a range of 100 miles, and a speed of 150 knots. The helicopters began Vietnam operations in January 1967. Typically three men—the pilot, co-pilot, and crew chief—made up the crew, but additional personnel often operated the hoist, the pair of M60 7.62mm or M2 .50-caliber machine guns, and six-barreled “Gatling” guns positioned on either side of the helicopter. The upgraded CH-53D model could reach a top speed of almost 200 mph, a range of 540 miles and lift almost 10 tons or 55 troops. Ultimately, the CH-53 and its many variants flew an array of missions, including assault transport, special operations, mine countermeasures, medical evacuation, and equipment recovery. Its faults were few, but the CH-53 did require extensive and constant maintenance, especially for its avionics and hydraulics.

On balance, the aircraft proved remarkably successful, with 384 A and D models produced for the Marine Corps and Navy. Sikorsky built additional aircraft for the armed forces of several foreign countries, as well as the U.S. Air Force. The first Air Force

HH-53B flew in 1967. With its refueling probe, drop tanks, advanced engines, jungle penetrator, chaff dispensers, infrared electronic countermeasures, and armor, it and the follow-on HH-53C quickly took over the combat search and rescue role. Dubbed “Super Jollys,” HH-53Bs were involved in the daring, but unsuccessful, Son Tay raid of 1970 to free American prisoners of war held in a camp deep in the heart of North Vietnam.

Despite its size, the CH-53 was surprisingly maneuverable, especially in a tactical approach, a tight turn to slow the aircraft quickly. Properly flown, the helicopter could decelerate from 120 knots to a hover in less than 15 seconds. Because rapid changes in speed and altitude could endanger the aircraft, by 1975 Air Force regulations discouraged these maneuvers, which handicapped operations during the *Mayaguez* action. Enemy fire shot down or damaged more than half (13 of 21) of the helicopters employed in the Koh Tang fight on 15 May 1975. Afterward, military analysts concluded the helicopters lacked sufficient firepower and were improperly operated by crews inadequately trained for the mission.

Since the 1975 Southeast Asia operations, the CH-53 has remained a mainstay of the U.S. armed forces. Sea Stallions took part in Operation Eagle Claw, the failed attempt in 1980 to free the Americans held hostage by Iran, Operation Desert Storm in 1991, and fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq following the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks. That the CH-53 is still in production in the 21st century is a tribute to the basic soundness of its design and its adaptability.



NHHC VN Collection

Journalists and civilian refugees fleeing Cambodia disembark from a CH-53 Sea Stallion helicopter on the flight deck of Okinawa.

including Cambodian President Saukham Khoy and Ambassador Dean, to warships and the air base at U-Tapao, Thailand. Among those rescued were 36 press correspondents plus citizens from an array of 12 friendly and neutral countries, including Spain, France, Australia, and Sweden. As a large crowd of Cambodians watched, the Marines withdrew to Phnom Penh's Pochentong airport. The ground troops then began taking fire from Khmer Rouge 107mm rockets. Helicopters from *Hancock* and two Air Force HH-53s then plucked this rear guard to

safety. The timing could not have been closer; within one minute of final lift-off, 82mm mortar rounds began impacting the landing zone, and the Air Force HH-53 extracting the command element took ground fire, which inflicted slight damage. In all, the helicopters from *Hancock* and *Okinawa* flew 99 missions without firing a shot. However narrow a call, Eagle Pull proved a model operation and served as a useful guide for the much larger evacuation from Saigon, Operation Frequent Wind.



NHHC VN Collection

Marines rush to establish a security perimeter at a landing zone in Phnom Penh as CH-53 Sea Stallions of Marine Heavy Helicopter Squadron (HMH) 463 bring in additional troops.



NHHC VN Collection

Refugees rush from the Marine helicopter that has brought them to safety.

PREPARATIONS FOR THE SAIGON EVACUATION

As South Vietnam continued to disintegrate, the Hanoi Politburo in late March decided to accelerate its offensive with the goal of capturing Saigon before the onset of the 1975 rainy season. Operation Eagle Pull reinforced the enemy's impression that the United States would not fight to defend the Thieu government. On 9 April, North Vietnamese forces assaulted Xuan Loc, only 35 miles northeast of the South Vietnamese capital. Here, the 18th ARVN Infantry Division resisted doggedly, but the town fell to the enemy on 22 April.

By this point, the American authorities faced the increasing likelihood of the collapse of the entire South Vietnamese war effort. Planning responsibilities for the probable evacuation fell on Vice Admiral Steele and Brigadier General Richard E. Carey of the composite 9th Marine Amphibious Brigade. They faced a plethora of uncertainties.

How many American citizens needed rescue? What about foreign nationals from countries such as the Republic of Korea and the Republic of China? Even harder to ascertain was the number of South Vietnamese to be evacuated. Estimates ranged from the low thousands to more than a million. Ultimately, planners decided to evacuate all South Vietnamese whose lives would be jeopardized by a Communist victory. In early April, the United States began flying out on commercial aircraft a trickle of refugees, most famously orphans, in Operation Babylift. The humanitarian effort experienced tragedy when a Lockheed C-5A Galaxy cargo plane of the Air Force's Military Airlift Command crashed on 4 April, killing most of the orphans aboard. Marine and Navy helicopters located the C-5A's flight recorder, and the salvage ship *Deliver* (ARS-23) recovered key pieces of the aircraft that enabled investigators to pinpoint the mechanical failure leading to the crash.

The Navy played another supporting role in Operation Babylift. The Naval Regional Medical Center on Guam provided assistance to children arriving on commercial airliners. When the State Department officially terminated the effort on 9 May, airmen had brought out 2,926 orphans, a number kept low through April by Ambassador Martin who feared a large-scale exodus would spark panic in Saigon—a well-founded concern.

Military planners confronted another great unknown. How would the advancing North Vietnamese react to an American



USMC Photo A1511000

Marine Brigadier General Richard E. Carey, commanding officer of the 9th Marine Expeditionary Brigade, on the bridge of the attack carrier *Hancock* (CVA-19).

withdrawal? Would they shoot at American rescue helicopters and seaborne evacuation craft? Would their Soviet-built Komar-class missile boats target unarmed U.S. cargo ships, or even naval vessels? And what of the South Vietnamese armed forces? Might they turn their weapons on retreating Americans? Under what conditions could Americans covering the evacuation use their weapons?

This last question was so important that orders came down from the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations in Washington limiting the use of force “to that required to protect and secure evacuation of U.S. nationals and to protect lift assets.” Admiral Weisner gave explicit guidelines for confrontations with Komar-class missile boats in international or South Vietnamese waters. Answers to many other questions remained painfully hazy, as did the timing of the operation. How long would the South Vietnamese army hold out? Particularly alarming was the strafing of the South Vietnamese presidential palace on 8 April by a VNAF pilot who changed sides. The unwillingness of the U.S. Embassy staff—or more accurately, Ambassador Martin—to envision the total collapse of the South Vietnamese government complicated the job of the uniformed leaders immensely. Marine Brigadier General Carey later remarked, “Suffice it to say that Frequent Wind was a planning nightmare. We had to plan for *all* options as best as they could be interpreted.” One Marine deeply involved in the planning process, Major James E. Livingston, later recalled the wide range of options confronting the planners. At one end of the scale lay the overly ambitious choices, such as evacuating up to a million South Vietnamese from Vung Tau or moving naval forces up the Long Tau River to set up a defense of Saigon. At the other extreme, Livingston had to develop plans for an evacuation of only American nationals by aircraft flying from Tan Son Nhut Airfield on the outskirts of Saigon. As Livingston remarked, “We had so damn many options I couldn’t really keep up with them all.” Then, as rapidly changing events in South Vietnam dictated major modifications to the voluminous plans, “unfortunately the paper machines just about snowed us under.”

On 19 April, the planners sent to the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations a figure of 203,955 potential evacuees in Saigon, a curiously exact number that gave some indication of the magnitude of the task ahead. That day, the Navy established a unique organization: the Amphibious Evacuation Security Force. The architects of the operation believed the most feasible approach was a massive helicopter evacuation. Brigadier General Carey later remarked, “I wanted very strongly . . . to be able to create a scene where we were coming in with a large force, hopefully, to buy some time and confuse people. We wanted to do it rapidly. And the only way you could do that, of course, was with multi-deck helicopter operations. . . . The precise helicopter flow, the precise way that we conducted our multi-deck operations, the exact way it was executed was the same way that we did it at Phnom Penh. In fact, it was basically the same battalion landing team.”

Much depended on the American forces achieving surprise. Given the large scale of the operation as it unfolded, ships and aircraft were drawn not only from bases in the Western Pacific, but from Hawaii and even San Diego. Schedules changed abruptly. The carrier *Hancock* and destroyer escort *Kirk* (DE-1087) had just entered Singapore for a port call. Captain Paul Jacobs, *Kirk*'s commanding officer, later observed “We had just arrived, tied up, and were ready to shut down the boilers when suddenly we received orders for an ‘Emergency Underway’ to return to Saigon. After getting all our crew back aboard within four hours, we proceeded down the Singapore River at night.” As Brigadier General Carey pointed out, secrecy dictated “we had to do this against a backdrop of close hold, don’t tip your hand, don’t let anybody know what you’re doing, this is political, we’re trying to work it out, there may or may not be a settlement, and so on. . . . It’s as difficult to move carriers as it is to keep the bar girls in Okinawa from knowing that something is going on, but when the story is told in detail, it’ll be a tribute to the Navy and Marines that they did as much as they did with as low a profile as we managed to keep.” Complicating preparations were the interservice differences. A Marine assessment complained,

“During the planning phase, many problems surfaced in matters of procedures, ordnance, mission clearance, and control and communications. Obtaining timely solutions was a difficult task.” One of the early plans originating from Lieutenant General Burns’ Seventh Air Force headquarters scheduled the helicopter flow in such a way that the Marine aircraft would run out of fuel before returning to their ships. A Marine after-action report noted, “Here was a perfect example of different services using different equipment and different language, not to mention methods of operation.”

New computer gear proved a mixed blessing. One top Marine complained to Seventh Air Force: “I think this is the first major operation we have run using that automated format. . . . I’d like to see you turn off the computers. Every time there was a change made we got a complete plan. And you had to read through it because you didn’t know what the change was. I must have read that [Seventh Air Force] plan ten times. I’m not kidding you, and you finally got so confused, you finally just had to stop and say, where in the hell am I? I think the computers just practically swamped us.” On the positive side, the new computers aboard the amphibious command ship *Blue Ridge* showed their value in planning the complex helicopter operations. As one of the Marine architects of the airlift remembered it, “The air flow went perfectly. It was absolutely remarkable.”

Another problem for the planners was micro-management by higher authority, also made possible by advances in technology. A satellite phone hook-up connected Washington, the Saigon embassy, and forces offshore simultaneously. Vice Admiral Steele, who also enjoyed direct communication with the Pacific Fleet headquarters on a “real time” basis, noted later: “The top guys . . . never bothered to study the details of the plan. They were doing a lot of work by phone, which I object to. They weren’t letting their staff do it.”

Uncertain as to the dimensions of the job at hand, the Navy assembled a major formation, the Seventh Fleet’s Amphibious Task Force (TF-76) of 46 ships under Rear Admiral Donald B. Whitmire, who flew his flag from *Blue Ridge*. Nearing the



Rear Admiral Donald B. Whitmire, commander of the Seventh Fleet’s amphibious task force during Operation Frequent Wind.

end of one deployment, this warship, equipped with specialized facilities that enabled tactical communications with the extraction and covering forces, suddenly received orders to stand off the coast of South Vietnam; she arrived on station on 3 April. Vice Admiral Steele elected to work from *Blue Ridge* instead of riding the fleet flagship, the guided-missile cruiser *Oklahoma City* (CLG-5), because of the amphibious command ship’s excellent tactical communications capabilities.

To evacuate and care for the refugees, Rear Admiral Whitmire had 15 amphibious ships, including one helicopter carrier, *Okinawa*, plus the attack carriers *Hancock* and *Midway* (CVA-41) reconfigured as helicopter platforms. These three warships, steaming about 30 to 50 miles south of Vung Tau, carried 77 Marine helicopters (34 CH-53Ds, 29 CH-46Ds, 8 AH-1Js, and 6 UH-1E), plus 10 Air Force CH/HH-53s (on *Midway*). From their decks, a Marine ground security force flew ashore to secure the helicopter landing zones. Surgical and

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medical teams afloat treated the sick and injured as they came out to the ships. Providing muscle in case hostilities flared between the rescuers and the Communists were two attack carriers, *Enterprise* and *Coral Sea* (CVA-43) with their embarked air wings. The guided-missile cruiser *Oklahoma City*, was also ready to lend her 6-inch guns if needed for fire support. Mobile logistic forces included replenishment ships and fleet tugs.

Controversial within the Navy leadership was the offloading of attack aircraft from carriers *Hancock* and *Midway*. Vice Admiral Steele calculated the risk: "I did want to retain a very substantial attack capability, because I thought that if it turned into a fight, those carriers were close, while the Air Force had to fly and tank [refuel] stuff in." Theoretically, *Midway* retained a modest strike capability by keeping aboard half her air wing. However, the ten Air Force CH-53 helicopters of the 56th Special Operations Wing that flew to the ship from Thailand had no rotor blade folding mechanism, so they took up all of the flight deck. *Midway's* fixed-wing aircraft remained stuck below in the hangar bay. *Hancock* put ashore her entire air wing to operate the Marine helicopters.

One problem in using CVAs as helicopter carriers lay in their medical facilities. The attack ships were not designed to handle large numbers of casualties. Maneuvering stretcher cases through the small hatches and around sharp corners to the sick bay could prove a real challenge. Operating spaces were scant compared to the amphibious ships. As the Task Force 76 report concluded, "CVA, even when configured for helicopters, is not a good mini-hospital." But necessity overrode such considerations, and the ultimate verdict read that the CVA as a helicopter carrier "is effective from a tactical standpoint."

Like the helicopter carriers, Rear Admiral Whitmire's Task Force 76 was an ad hoc organization. Some of its warships heading for home after lengthy deployments had been turned around. For example, *Enterprise* had just entered Subic Bay on 18 April for a well-earned port call, but "no sooner had she dropped anchor than a message arrived advising her to proceed at 25 knots to a holding area [off]

Vung Tau. Within a few minutes of receipt of this message, *Enterprise* weighed anchor and was again heading west." New to the theater was the tank landing ship *Tuscaloosa* (LST-1187), which hurried out from the West Coast, spending but six hours at Pearl Harbor before pushing on to Okinawa. There, her crew worked for 51 straight hours off-loading cargo and taking aboard Marines and gear. She immediately departed for Subic Bay, steaming the whole distance at full power. Operations at this pace on short-handed ships took a toll on men and machinery. For instance, *Coral Sea* reported, "The engineering plant continued to suffer from many casualties resulting primarily from an inadequate number and training level of personnel."



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Vice Admiral George P. Steele II, Commander Seventh Fleet, watches evacuation operations aboard USS *Blue Ridge* (LCC-19) during the fall of South Vietnam, 28 April 1975.



The attack carrier *Enterprise* steams in the Pacific. The warship's combat aircraft, which included the first operational squadron of F-14 Tomcats, defended U.S. naval forces evacuating tens of thousands of refugees from South Vietnam.

THE EXODUS BEGINS

The endurance of the Sailors serving in the South China Sea would be further tested. Transport aircraft that had been flying refugees from Tan Son Nhut Airfield found conditions increasingly challenging. On 25 April, one giant C-5 Galaxy rolled to a stop only to find an estimated 3,000 people, most of them South Vietnamese military personnel and their families, fighting fiercely for access to the aircraft. Military police were swamped in the human deluge; the flight crew, realizing that they



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A VNAF C-130 transport that tried to take off from Tan Son Nhut burns on the tarmac after being hit by enemy fire.

were about to be overrun, slammed the doors on the throng. Two days after this appalling scene, the North Vietnamese Army closed the ring around Saigon and started firing rockets into the city and bombarding the airport. Cutting the last ground route out of the capital on 28 April, the enemy began infiltrating soldiers into the columns of refugees streaming into Saigon. That afternoon, North Vietnamese pilots, flying captured aircraft, struck Tan Son Nhut, destroying several planes there. Reacting to the deepening crisis, *Hancock* dispatched 40 Marines by helicopter to reinforce the security guard at the Defense

Attaché compound on the fringes of the airfield, and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)-owned Air America helicopters began to extract some refugees, including U.S. nationals. In the morning hours of 29 April, rockets fell on the airfield, killing two U.S. Marine security guards, Corporal Charles McMahon Jr. and Lance Corporal Darwin D. Judge, the last uniformed Americans to die in Vietnam. That same day, the Saigon government collapsed. Some South Vietnamese fighting men bravely stayed behind to protect their families and take whatever the Communists had in store for them. One such individual was the Vietnam Navy's Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Tran Van Chon, who spent the next ten years in Communist "re-education" camps. Many others in high positions, however, fled the country. In the afternoon, the commander of the VNAF, Lieutenant General Tran Van Minh, with 30 staff members, demanded rescue by Americans at the DAO compound. American servicemen disarmed them; they were evacuated several hours later. Some high-ranking individuals opted for Thailand, but others eyed the American ships offshore. One



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Captain (later Rear Admiral) Tran Van Chon, the Vietnam Navy Chief of Naval Operations, confers with U.S. Navy Captain Paul N. Gray earlier in the war. The North Vietnamese imprisoned Chon, a brave and dedicated naval officer, for ten years after the fall of Saigon.

of the first notables to reach that haven was Nguyen Cao Ky, the former prime minister of the Republic of Vietnam, who landed by helicopter, together with Ambassador Martin's wife, Dorothy, aboard the amphibious ship *Denver* (LPD-9). Reports soon thereafter reached Task Force 76 that as many as a hundred South Vietnamese helicopters at Tan Son Nhut were preparing to fly to U.S. ships. The crews of overcrowded South Vietnamese planes departing for Thailand fought soldiers desperate to get aboard.

As the situation unraveled in Saigon, President

at the DAO compound at Tan Son Nhut. The first helicopters landed "to the cheers of awaiting evacuees almost all of whom were overcome by emotion at the sight of the organized and well-disciplined Marines. The sight of these Marines signified to the evacuees there would be a tomorrow." As soon as the Marines disembarked, evacuees scrambled aboard. The helicopters lifted off six minutes after touching down. Thus began the largest helicopter evacuation in history. Marine Brigadier General Carey later reminisced, "I'm not sure what you call this:

D-Day, Event Day, [or] Evac Day." Whatever name applied, Frequent Wind lasted almost 18 hours.

Split command threatened to hinder the pace of operations. When the Marine helicopters flew over land, they fell under the control of Lieutenant General Burns in Thailand. Once they went "feet wet," control reverted to Rear Admiral Whitmire on *Blue Ridge*. Further muddying the waters, the operational command of the Air Force helicopters flying from *Midway* remained with Lieutenant General Burns. Thus, the Air Force pilots communicated with Seventh Air Force, who passed queries to *Blue Ridge*, who redirected them to Brigadier General Carey. As one Marine analyst noted, "This time consuming and indirect route created considerable confusion right down to the last minute." Vice Admiral Steele later agreed, "Here we had an Air Force element onboard a U.S. Navy

aircraft carrier, at sea, under the direct operational control of an Air Force headquarters a great distance away ashore."

Yet these potential roadblocks proved more threat than hindrance. As Vice Admiral Steele concluded later, "[Lieutenant General Burns]



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Nguyen Cao Ky, Vice President of the Republic of Vietnam and Lieutenant General Ngo Quang Truong, Commandant of the Vietnam Marine Corps, arrive on board a Seventh Fleet ship during the evacuation from Saigon.

Ford, meeting with his advisors in Washington, directed the execution of Operation Frequent Wind. In midafternoon, the first CH-53s from *Okinawa* lifted off carrying the ground security force (GSF), ultimately numbering 865 Marines, who strengthened defenses of the main helicopter landing zone



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Air Force personnel give the thumbs-up sign to one of their HH-53B helicopters, a detachment of which operated from the carrier *Midway* during Operation Frequent Wind.

certainly stayed out of my hair while the thing was going on, and he could have been very difficult. But he stood back; he let me do the thing. I thought his airborne command post did very well indeed, and I thought the Air Force in general did extremely well. We had a great partnership.” At the deckplate level, Vice Admiral Steele noted, “the Air Force colonel [on *Blue Ridge*] was a very reasonable man, and the closer you get to the people at the scene, the more these sticky, traumatic, interservice control problems tend to go away.”

Less positive was the situation with communications. The volume of message traffic soared, frequently overwhelming the capacity of ships to handle it. *Coral Sea* reported communications, already very heavy at 1,100 messages a day, peaking out at 1,800. Equipment failed; the voice circuit linking ships with Marines ashore was down 70 percent of the time. Marine portable equipment

on the ground often proved more reliable than the much more elaborate gear installed on the command ship *Blue Ridge*.

Other problems plagued the communicators. Equipment shortages led Marines at the DAO compound to requisition commercial hand-held radio sets from that facility. As the withdrawal accelerated, circuits went off the air. One Marine specialist reported, “We had an executive line to the American ambassador [plus other hotlines, but] as the day wore on these became moot because most of the key personnel at these locations became evacuees themselves.” Communist jamming posed an intermittent threat, although “the transmissions were primarily vulgarity inviting us to get the hell out of the country.” Put together, these hurdles meant some of the most urgent messages required eight hours from release to receipt.

Vice Admiral Steele found micromanagement

from higher headquarters particularly irksome.

Later, he angrily commented,

The insatiable demand of Washington authorities for details that they couldn't possibly use . . . actually degrades an operation. . . . [I had] people worrying me . . . to give them side numbers of three Air Force airplanes and helicopters that were supposed to be going into Saigon. . . . I said—and the traffic will show this—“This tries my patience to try to figure out what side numbers they are. What could you possibly do with this?” . . . It's that kind of pettifogging detail for people who are so far away from the scene that infuriate and tie up the commander from doing things that he really needs to do to put his mind, his full intellect, his full experience to bear on the problem he actually faces. To continually appeal to the man for data is just beyond belief. And . . . where the enemy has the capability to hurt you at sea, the provision of data and detail like this causes you to transmit, which gives away your location, fixes your position precisely, and is dangerous to you.

Asked for the origin of these irritating queries, Vice Admiral Steele responded they came from the offices of the Pacific Command and the CNO. He added, “I thumbed my nose, in effect, at some of the messages. . . . What [were] they going to do, come down the wire and relieve me?”

Despite these distractions, the evacuation proceeded swiftly. At the DAO compound, many U.S. citizens were preparing for their second helicopter flight of the day. Plucked earlier from Saigon rooftops by Air America (CIA) helicopters, the evacuees at Tan Son Nhut were organized into groups of 50 and led to an empty helicopter by a Marine wearing high visibility colors.

For most of the afternoon, the evacuation from the airfield ran ahead of schedule, but in the early evening a rainstorm swept the area for 90 minutes. In addition, gunfire from the battle raging around Tan Son Nhut hit the compound. One American observer commented, “The ARVN fought well. There was a very, very heavy artillery duel, and they were firing and fighting on both sides of the DAO

complex. There was tank fire, there was recoilless rifle fire, and of course the normal small arms/automatic weapons fire,” some of the last from “quad dusters” (four .50-caliber machine guns mounted on gun trucks) in North Vietnamese hands. “Not only were you getting dinged occasionally on purpose, but you were getting dinged, if you will, by the longs and shorts [rounds].”

Adding to the increased sense of urgency was the press of panicked South Vietnamese hoping to escape the fall of their country. Major Livingston, one of the Marines involved in the final stages of the drama at the DAO compound, recalled, “The Vietnamese were trying to get on the helicopter. I didn't kill any, but I thought that I was going to have to kill some of them. I had a couple of M-16s and had to shoot at their feet to keep them away. Most [of the Vietnamese] were PX workers, office workers—I felt terrible about it.”

Another officer on the scene was Colonel Alfred M. Gray, commander of the 4th Marines and later a general and Commandant of the Marine Corps. He remembered, “We got the rest of the evacuees out. We got the ground security force out, we went out in the last two helicopters, and prior to leaving we burned and blew the DAO compound. We destroyed the JCS satellite station, and I guess in a bit of sentimentality we blew the house where [Army] General [Creighton] Abrams [had] lived because we didn't want anybody to have that.” By the final flight, Marine and Air Force helicopters had snatched from the compound 395 American nationals plus 4,475 other refugees.

Loaded with even more tension was the situation late in the day at the U.S. Embassy. None of the complex early planning had envisioned a large airlift from the embassy. In a face-to-face encounter, Ambassador Martin informed Brigadier General Carey two Air America helicopters would suffice for the 100 or so individuals likely to need airlift from that location and “that he [Martin] had no intention of conducting a mass evacuation from the embassy.” But in the afternoon of the 29th, Carey learned both CIA aircraft would be unavailable: “Air America was phased out of the operation at this time. They

were all being recovered or crashing out at sea somewhere." Thus, Marine helicopters inherited the mission. Carey asked for an evacuee count. Martin told him rather than 100, the number might exceed 2,500. Making matters worse, only two suitable landing sites existed, with the one on the embassy rooftop unfit for the large CH-53. The first helicopters to reach the embassy grounds were two CH-46s and two medevac helicopters escorted by two Cobra AH-1J gunships. These aircraft brought in a much needed quick reaction platoon of Marines to bolster the embassy guard. This security force was augmented over the next four hours by two additional platoons making a total ground security force of 130 plus the 40 original Marines and the landing zone control team.

In spite of all obstacles, a helicopter flow of one CH-46 and one CH-53 began running at ten minute intervals, trying, in the words of one observer, "to empty a bottomless well." Ambassador Martin ordered the evacuees be dispatched at a ratio of three South Vietnamese for each American. By early evening, gunfire—"random type stuff, described by one officer as almost drunk firing"—echoed around the embassy and shoulder-launched SA-7 anti-aircraft missiles threatened the helicopters. The same heavy cloud cover and torrential rains that caused trouble at Tan Son Nhut closed down the embassy airlift for 90 minutes. As the situation deteriorated, Martin received a message from Washington: "President has authorized nineteen helos and no more. You will depart on last lift." Thereafter, helicopters left the embassy grounds with the maximum number of passengers and no baggage. Soon came the instructions: "Only U.S. citizens and GSF will be taken out from this point." A final communication from the embassy read: "Due to necessity to destroy commo gear, this is the last Saigon message to SecState." At 0458 on 30 April, the ambassador's helicopter departed the embassy roof; it landed aboard *Blue Ridge* at 0547.

Getting the Marine rearguard out safely proved a hair-raising business. Brigadier General Carey ordered the troops to retire into the building and work their way to the roof, barricading doorways

behind them. Although the ground security force fired no rounds, its Marines did employ riot control agents such as mace and tear gas, the vapors of which gave the illusion at one point that the building was on fire and led some of the last helicopters to abort their approaches. Radioed one aviator on the scene "ground fire all around embassy at this time. All GSF are on roof top and VN in lower floors [apparently looting]." Because only the CH-46 with its maximum passenger load of 25 could land on the embassy rooftop, extraction of the last units went forward at a painfully slow pace. But finally at 0747 on 30 April came the signal: "Last Americans out of Saigon. All GSF accounted for."

Fleet helicopters plucked a total of 978 U.S. civilians plus 1,120 third-country and South Vietnamese refugees from the embassy grounds following the closure of the landing zone at the DAO compound. The cost to the ground security force was remarkably light: two non-battle injuries. A fallen hot electrical line inflicted severe shocks to one Marine; another suffered cuts and abrasions when CH-53 rotor wash blew him off the roof of a building in the embassy compound. Left behind were approximately 400 South Vietnamese and South Korean embassy personnel. Six more CH-53 flights could have rescued those individuals, but U.S. command authorities never learned of their existence and thus did not order more missions. Memories of those left behind proved bitter to at least one Marine in the rearguard: "That morning, there was [sic] kids, women, children, and ever since then I've felt like a coward because I ran out on them. Those people deserved to get out of there [but] our government had turned and run on them."



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With a rescue boat from *Blue Ridge* standing by, a South Vietnamese air force pilot ditches his UH-1 Huey in the South China Sea. Numerous South Vietnamese aircraft headed for the Seventh Fleet as the military situation ashore deteriorated.

REFUGEES AT SEA

Meanwhile, the U.S. Navy ships offshore struggled to cope with the flood of evacuees. To direct the aircraft coming from Saigon, Task Force 76 established the helicopter directions center (HDC) aboard *Okinawa* that sent flights to an open deck on either an amphibious ship or one of the helicopter carriers. The amphibious ships steamed in a line inshore of the carriers to try to lighten the work of the extremely busy warships. “This operation resembled a railroad switching yard with HDC allocating helos to clear decks and thus spreading the load of evacuees as evenly as possible among the ships.”



A desperate Vietnam Air Force pilot abandons his helicopter dangerously close to *Blue Ridge* and other warships of the evacuation fleet.

Even the carriers were soon overwhelmed by the large numbers of South Vietnamese aircraft. Thirteen ARVN helicopters landed on *Hancock* during the morning of 29 April; these aircraft brought out to the ship 141 refugees, mostly relatives of the Vietnamese crewmen. By the end of Operation Frequent Wind, aboard *Midway* were three Vietnamese CH-47s, 40 UH-1 Hueys, and one Cessna O-1 Bird Dog, plus five Air America Hueys—all, of course, in addition to the ship’s own aircraft. As decks became jammed with refugee aircraft, American Sailors had no choice but to push some



Blue Ridge Sailors push a UH-1B Iroquois over the side to make room for other helicopters bringing South Vietnamese military personnel and their families out to the evacuation fleet.

over the side to make way for others. The amphibious transport dock *Duluth* (LPD-6) crewmen jettisoned seven Hueys in quick succession.

During 29 April, both South Vietnamese aircraft and U.S. helicopters arrived with maximum loads. One CH-46 flew onto *Duluth* with 45 people aboard; CH-53s sometimes carried more than 70 individuals. One UH-1E Huey (designed for 12 infantrymen) arrived on *Midway* packed with 50 people—mostly children. One HH-53C pilot noted that “with baggage left behind and a high proportion of the diminutive Asian women and children among the passengers,” he carried more than 100 evacuees out of Saigon in one flight. Refugees coming out in American helicopters were allowed to bring one small handbag. But U.S. rules did not apply on South Vietnamese aircraft, some of which arrived with a miscellany of belongings, in one case, a broken-down motorcycle. Sometimes an escaping South Vietnamese airman would load his family and their possessions but threaten to kill anyone else who tried to board the aircraft.

The hectic pace of operations, coupled with few spare pilots, compelled aircrews to put in long hours

South Vietnamese Aircraft Descend on the Fleet

COMPLICATING THE HELICOPTER FLOW WAS THE appearance of more than 60 South Vietnamese aircraft. In the words of one Marine, the result was “a veritable demolition derby around and aboard USN helo decks. Only skillful flying by USMC pilots and quick actions by deck crews prevented serious loss of personnel and equipment. Incoming VNAF helos cut off USMC helos on their final approaches and refused to be waved off. It was not uncommon to have two to three VNAF helos all trying to land at one time.” A *Hancock* crewman recalled: “To this day, I’m still very surprised we didn’t have any mid-air collisions because they were coming from every direction. It

was complete chaos. Those helicopters were coming so frequently, the sky was dark from jet exhaust.” *Kirk* alone handled 14 South Vietnamese helicopters. The pilot of one Boeing CH-47 Chinook—too large to land on *Kirk*’s stern—hovered while his passengers jumped into the waiting arms of the American Sailors and then put his aircraft down in the sea. *Blue Ridge* became a magnet for fugitive ARVN helicopters; the command ship recorded 15 attempts at landing on deck, six helicopters ditching alongside, one crashing on the flight deck, and a UH-1 plowing into the starboard side of the ship after the pilot bailed out. Fortunately, damage to the ship was cosmetic.



Courtesy Craig Compianso

Sailors on board *Kirk* wave off a CH-47 Chinook operating dangerously close to the destroyer escort.



Courtesy USS Kirk Association

A CH-47 Chinook comes apart in the sea just after its pilot, shown in the water to the right of the helicopter, safely lowered his passengers onto *Kirk* and then ditched the aircraft. He survived the daring exploit.

in a hostile environment and often in bad weather: “The hardest kind of flying” in the words of one CINCPAC message to Washington. Most aviators flew 12 to 17 hours with the record set at 22.5 hours by a Marine aircrewman. *Midway*’s four Sea King helicopters of Helicopter Combat Support Squadron 1 (HC-1), Detachment 2, logged 60.9 hours of flight time and made 158 landings aboard six different ships; the four aircraft rescued 1,600 refugees with four tons of belongings. Marine helicopters flew 590 sorties during the 17-hour period. The

Marine after-action report for *Frequent Wind* said of the aircrews: “They were tasked to the limits . . . and performed superbly.” Their discipline was “excellent;” despite ample provocation they did not fire a round. Of course, essential to the success of the entire operation was the serviceability of the aircraft. A Marine comment encapsulated this critical dimension: “Availability of helicopters was the most critical readiness thing that we had to keep up. [It is] a tribute to the crew chiefs [who did] a superhuman job.”

The ships worked as hard as the aircraft. The heavy cruiser *Oklahoma City*, overwhelmed with desperate South Vietnamese pilots, flew off Vice Admiral Steele's command helicopter and took aboard 12 ARVN aircraft loaded with 154 refugees. The amphibious assault ship *Okinawa* registered more than 1,000 landings and departures during the 30 hours her deck personnel were at flight quarter stations from 0400 on 29 April to 1000 the next day. Even after 1000, the flight deck remained busy as helicopters transferred evacuees and shuttled injured refugees to other ships for medical care.

Crowds of evacuees strained the facilities of their host ships to the utmost. *Midway* took aboard 3,073 refugees; *Okinawa*, 1,200, some of whom "were familiar faces from 'Eagle Pull,' especially the newsmen and women who were beginning to think of the *Okinawa* as 'home.'" Despite the transfer of evacuees from the carriers to other ships, *Midway* found herself packed with more than 1,000 refugees still aboard during the night of 29–30 April. As all available berthing spaces filled, many South Vietnamese spent the night on mats or blankets in the hangar bay. Crewmembers on *Hancock* set up wooden troughs flushed by seawater as emergency toilet facilities. One of the carrier's corpsmen remembered: "The refugees didn't use the troughs for that purpose. They began washing their clothes in them. I don't know whether or not they were also using them for toilets. They may have been washing their clothes up forward and then toileting aft."

Amphibious ships with their cavernous spaces coped best. Temporary screening shelters allowed U.S. personnel to disarm the new arrivals and to route those with acute medical problems to the proper facilities. The amphibious cargo ship *Mobile* (LKA-115) reported: "Feeding was done in relays of mess personnel who carried big GI [government issue] cans around the various levels of the hold, ladling out an American attempt at oriental stew. The food was hot and there was plenty of it and the refugees did not seem to mind the inconvenience. Head facilities were built out over the side of the ship by the hull technicians and fresh drinking water and washing services were supplied continuously by

garden hoses." The *Denver* crew first bedded down more than 500 refugees in a "tent city" erected amid abandoned helicopters on the flight deck and then processed 7,500 Vietnamese in the well deck. The amphibious transport *Vancouver* (LPD-2) handled 2,200 evacuees. From the larger warships, the refugees boarded landing craft for transfer to nearby MSC ships. Sailors faced heavy workloads: "The hours became incredibly long as Marine helos came aboard with load after load of refugees, yet the crew of *Denver* willingly stayed on the job assisting and feeding . . . thousands of [them]." *Okinawa* acknowledged, "All hands were taxed to their maximum endurance in carrying out their duties as well as accommodating evacuees."



NHHC VN Collection

The faces of these Vietnamese refugees reflect the fear and anxiety caused by the flight from their homeland.

SEABORNE EVACUATION FROM VIETNAM

Simultaneous with the airborne operations, but much less publicized, came a seaborne evacuation. Although the rules of engagement kept U.S. Navy ships from approaching closer than a mile to the coast of South Vietnam, this restriction did not apply to MSC ships with their Marine security detachments. Both merchant seamen and Marines did yeoman work. Four MSC-controlled ships (*SS Green Wave*, *SS Pioneer Commander*, *SS Pioneer Contender*, and *SS Green Forest*) were at Saigon; five more were at Vung Tau (USNS *Greenville Victory*, USNS *Sgt. Andrew Miller* [T-AK-242], USNS *Sgt. Truman Kimbro* [T-AK-244], *SS Green Port*, and *SS American Challenger*) with the *SS Pioneer Contractor* steaming from the Philippines for that port.

Now, all remaining shipping that could move, including one LST plus various smaller watercraft, headed downriver from Saigon. Five MSC tugs pulled barges filled with refugees; one of the craft carried an estimated 6,000 evacuees. From Can Tho, the American consul general and his party, plus numerous South Vietnamese refugees, escaped down the Bassac River in amphibious landing craft. Harassed by small arms and rocket fire during their 16-hour ordeal, the party reached the sea without loss and rendezvoused with two American ships, *Barbour County* (LST-1195) and *Pioneer Contender*. By daybreak on 30 April, all vessels had cleared the shipping channels and were anchored at Vung Tau.

In that roadstead, seven MSC and U.S. Navy ships loaded refugees for transit onward, but not without incident. The ships came under fire from enemy artillery, with the closest rounds falling about a mile from the tank landing ship *Peoria* (LST-1183). The nearby destroyer *Henry B. Wilson* (DDG-7) went to general quarters, at which point the firing stopped. In another episode fraught with tension, *Sgt. Andrew Miller* was taking refugees aboard when a South Vietnamese helicopter crashed into a barge alongside, injuring evacuees.

Moments later, crewmen of a South Vietnamese ship, who were determined to transfer their human cargo to *Sgt. Andrew Miller*, began firing small arms at the American ship, which requested assistance from *Henry B. Wilson*. As the destroyer approached, the Vietnamese ship attempted to ram the American warship. *Wilson's* crew trained her guns on the bridge of the vessel, a move that created the desired effect. Orders soon reached the ships at Vung Tau. They were to move 20 miles south to a position out of sight of land "to preclude uncontrolled refugees from approaching."

Throughout the withdrawal, combat air patrols flown from *Coral Sea* and *Enterprise* offered insurance against intervention by enemy aircraft. Stationed about 90 miles off South Vietnam, *Coral Sea* launched 66 sorties; the nuclear carrier, 95, including 20 flown by Grumman F-14A Tomcats. *Enterprise* was the first ship to operate the new fighter. Neither carrier wing expended ordnance; *Enterprise* lost one LTV Corporation A-7E Corsair to an undetermined cause.

Overall, given the scope of Operation Frequent Wind and the conditions around Saigon, casualties were remarkably light. Operational losses included one AH-1J Cobra ditched due to fuel exhaustion when the landing space on *Kirk* was preempted by an Air America helicopter; *Kirk* rescued both airmen. A CH-46 search and rescue helicopter crashed near *Hancock*; two crewmen, Marine Captain William C. Nystul and Marine 1st Lieutenant Michael J. Shea, died on 29 April — the last U.S. aviator casualties of the war in Vietnam. Enemy action took an even lighter toll. As noted earlier, rockets killed two Marines on the ground shortly before the start of Frequent Wind. Hostile antiaircraft fire lightly damaged one helicopter. By American reckoning, the Communists fired perhaps a dozen SA-7 antiaircraft missiles at U.S. helicopters during the evacuation. Although none scored, one exploded so close the aircraft's crew initially

thought it had hit. By way of contrast, escaping South Vietnamese aircraft suffered several losses to the SA-7 missiles. Later analysis attributed the overall enemy failure to several factors: a mission altitude from 1,500 to 4,000 feet that gave the U.S. crewmen time to spot and react to the SA-7 missiles by making a hard turn into the missile's path and firing flares. The relatively high flight profile also kept the helicopters above the effective range of small arms fire. Analysts also concluded low infrared reflective paint helped.

Mulling over the slight enemy resistance, one Air America pilot believed the North Vietnamese command had issued "very firm marching orders to minimize casualties on the part of America." Vice Admiral Steele came to the same conclusion. In a December 1975 interview he commented:

Gee, these fellows must have consciously let us go, because they could have done a lot worse to us. . . . But I wondered, also, if their command and control was good enough to react . . . so quickly, to tell their people to let us go. [If so,] I kind of think that it was a sound idea on their part. What the heck, if the Americans are going, let them go. The only problem is, of course, they were letting a lot of their enemies out too. Maybe they thought, "Well, good riddance. It'll save us a lot of trouble in the long run." They were losing a lot of money. All these people [top South Vietnamese] came out loaded with diamonds and cash and so forth that they had saved largely, I think, through bilking us over the years. But at any rate, the North Vietnamese and the indigenous VC were losing that. But I think probably they looked at the possibilities for the counteraction on our part at the time with all that air there and they figured it's just as well to let it go.

Frequent Wind, like the earlier Eagle Pull, had been a risky thing; in the words of Urey W. Patrick, an analyst from the Center for Naval Analyses, "We were lucky this time." The last Marines lifted off from Saigon at 0743 on 30 April; barely two hours later, North Vietnamese soldiers were marching down the streets of Saigon. At 1024, President Duong Van Minh announced the unconditional surrender of the

Republic of Vietnam. More dramatic, shortly after noon, a Communist tank crashed through the gates of the presidential palace.

Still, as a U.S. Army team later concluded of Operation Frequent Wind: "All in all, the evacuation of 130,000 Vietnamese was an admirable feat in itself, comparable in every aspect to a successful military operation. This was a far cry from what had happened at Danang, Nha Trang, and even Phnom Penh." By this one measure, Operation Frequent Wind rivaled that of Operation Overlord when allied warships and aircraft put ashore 160,000 soldiers in Normandy on D-Day, 6 June 1944. Pentagon staffers concluded in a post-mortem at the end of May they were satisfied with the conduct of the operation. Vice Admiral Steele received the Distinguished Service Medal; kudos went especially to the aviators, Marines, and Sailors who had done the heavy lifting. But the praise tasted bittersweet. Vice Admiral Steele concluded, "I hope it never happens again. I don't like to be in charge of a rear guard."



NHHC

On 30 April 1975, *Henry B. Wilson* came to aid of USNS *Sgt. Andrew Miller* (T-AK-242), which panicky South Vietnamese refugees were threatening to overwhelm.



NHHC

Sgt. Andrew Miller



Southeast Asia

PASSAGE TO THE PHILIPPINES

Operation Frequent Wind ended officially on 1 May, but refugees continued to stream out of Vietnam on a wide array of craft. During the preceding week, top officers of the Vietnam Navy had begun planning for evacuation of their ships. Heroic efforts by the shipyard at Saigon had put almost all VNN vessels into at least marginally seaworthy condition. Now, virtually every ship that could put to sea was on the move— 26 warships carrying an estimated 30,000 refugees, mostly families of the South Vietnamese sailors. These were soon joined by four Cambodian ships plus two LSTs from the Republic of China and another from South Korea.



NHHC

Do Kiem, the officer shown pointing during a wartime naval operation, was involved in planning the 1975 evacuation of the Vietnam Navy from Saigon and the Mekong Delta.

Also streaming away from the Communist victors were vast numbers of fishing boats of varying degrees of seaworthiness. Lieutenant Commander Hugh J. Doyle, the engineering officer on *Kirk* recorded his impressions:



Courtesy Hugh Doyle

A warship of the Vietnam Navy, loaded with civilian refugees, heads for the Philippines.

Somebody in the wardroom that morning told me, “You ought to see all the fishing boats!”. . . I looked over toward the beach, which was about 12 miles away, and there were so many fishing boats, I could hardly see the water. They were all swarming out, all flying Vietnamese flags, going as fast as these little old junk-type boats could go. One looked like someone had taken a candy bar, laid it on the sidewalk, and let the ants get at it. The [U.S.] ships were taking them as fast as they could, but there was a bit of panic. This was because the fishermen and peasants in the boats were a lot less “sophisticated” than the military people and urban families who had come out on the helos the previous day. The helo people were relatively calm. The Vietnamese fishermen and peasants, on the other hand, were just in a frenzy.

By one U.S. estimate on that day, more than 500 small craft were in the water between the task force and Vung Tau.

American Sailors frequently noted some of these refugees were people of means and education. As one *Hancock* crewman remarked, “We called them ‘refugees’ but they weren’t in wretched condition. They were from Saigon, a big city, and were mostly middle class.” A corpsman on *Kirk* concluded, “The refugees were in pretty good shape . . . I thought about tuberculosis, dysentery—all the diseases endemic in



Courtesy Richard Armitage

Richard Armitage, a three-tour U.S. naval advisor, confidante of many South Vietnamese naval officers, and future Deputy Secretary of State, poses for a photo. As a representative of the Defense Attaché Office, Armitage assisted the Vietnam Navy's departure from the Republic of Vietnam.

Vietnam. But these refugees were the upper crust of Vietnamese society. . . . In fact, many came aboard with shoe boxes full of gold, which we confiscated to prevent a situation in which theft might occur. We gave the people a receipt." Some of the Vietnamese also brought along their pets. Captain Jacobs, the commanding officer of *Kirk* received an order "to get rid of all the animals. . . . They wanted me to take pets from the kids and throw the animals over the side. So the XO [executive officer] said, 'What do you wanna do, Captain?' I replied, 'You answer the message. Tell the powers that be that the action is done, and then don't do a goddam thing!' Had I followed that order, I would have had a riot on my hands."

The mass exodus by the Vietnam Navy vessels surprised the American command, which learned of it only as the ships were underway. *Kirk*, the U.S. destroyer escort sent by Vice Admiral Steel to assist the Vietnamese, soon reported most of the ships were, at best, in marginal condition. Some were towing others. Many lacked essential supplies and personnel. Responding to their plight, U.S. warships dispatched salvage and repair parties to try to keep the Vietnamese craft afloat. Other American naval craft loaned their medical detachments; *Mobile*, for example, transferred her ship's doctor and three corpsmen to *Kirk* to act as circuit medics for the Vietnamese vessels. Still other U.S. warships provided

essentials, with *Duluth* sending food, water, and medical supplies to two refugee craft off her stern, one of which was loaded with about 230 ARVN soldiers and the other carrying 200 children. An American report noted on other South Vietnamese boats, "numerous prospective mothers are in late stages of pregnancy." By their very nature, military forces did not have readily available certain items necessary for civilians. One Marine listed "the following . . . examples of non-military items required for the efficient, humane, sanitary processing of civilian refugees: sundry packs, toilet paper, baby bottles, Kotex pads, water containers, blankets, paper/plastic eating utensils, disposable diapers, and clothing items."



Courtesy Paul Jacobs

Commander Paul Jacobs, commanding officer of the destroyer escort *Kirk*.

MSC shipping, split into three groups based on speed, each with a U.S. Navy ship as escort, thickened the refugee flood. All vessels were crowded to bursting with *Greenville Victory* reporting 5,400 aboard and 6,148 on *Sgt. Andrew Miller*. When the Task Force 76 surgeon inspected the MSC ships, he found the passengers short of water and the holds especially hot. He ordered periodic health checks and suggested



Courtesy Jan Herman

The destroyer escort *Kirk* proved to be a godsend to many refugees needing help on the high seas off Vietnam in May 1975.

the ships put into the Philippines to replenish water supplies and allow refugees to go ashore.

Of this maritime miscellany the Korean tank landing ship *LST-117*, with 3,000 refugees in the 10-knot MSC convoy, presented a special problem. One Marine aviator remembered, “It was hot out there in that ocean, and [the LST] went dead in the water and we couldn’t get those people water. We tried to drop them water from the helicopters. We only had two little Hueys working at that time aboard *Blue Ridge*. There was nothing we could do. If we had landed, those two Hueys would never have gotten off. That would have been just suicide on our part.” Several South Vietnamese ships broke down altogether. Seventh Fleet Sailors scuttled four craft to eliminate hazards to navigation. Fortunately, most refugee vessels were in better condition, but to be safe, P-3 Orion patrol aircraft checked them daily during their seven-day transit time to Subic Bay. Other problems would arise when the armada reached the Philippines, a country justifiably concerned about this incoming human tide.



NHHC VN Collection

Refugees, finally safe on board a Seventh Fleet ship, manage smiles.



A P-3 Orion patrol plane investigates a vessel in the South China Sea.

MARITIME REFUGEES

A more immediate challenge for the U.S. Navy lay in the necessity to organize the refugees still aboard the U.S. warships. Given the frenetic nature of the evacuation, this sorting process proved a complex one. Thus far no effective security screening had taken place due to the “difficulties imposed by [the] time sensitive atmosphere and corruption [in South Vietnam].” For the Navy, a worry was “that hostile intelligence services have endeavored to exploit this situation by infiltration of controlled agents into evacuee groups”—a concern that apparently was unfounded.

Faced with huge numbers of refugees and a potential security concern, the Navy was anxious to transfer as quickly as possible virtually all the South Vietnamese from its warships to the MSC ships or other merchantmen. As boats and helicopters shuttled refugees back and forth, the activity served as a magnet for additional large numbers of Vietnamese who struck out from the coast in anything that would float. On 2 May, Vice Admiral Steele reported to Pacific Fleet headquarters:

For past 24 hours, TF-76 has been working fast and furious, loading evacuees into MSC shipping. However, it became obvious this morning that we were not making enough progress. New evacuees were arriving . . . at a rate equal to or greater than the ship embark rate from the barges (from Con Son Island). We are being faced with the choice of forcibly keeping the boats away from the MSC ships or giving the evacuees in the boats safe haven. The choice was obvious. The only way to load the evacuees off both the barges and indigenous boats and get the TF-76/MS ships underway before additional boats arrived from land and the situation became beyond our control was to simultaneously offload the barges to the MSC ships and to TF-76 units. With a lot of hustle from all hands, definite progress is now being made.

The Seventh Fleet commander sought to turn the tide by moving the holding area for Task Force 76 to a position 100 miles southeast of Vung Tau. As Vice Admiral Steele later explained:

I was reluctant to pick up a whole lot of these people, unless it was quite clear that if we didn't do it they were going to die. And I moved the fleet out from the coast, so that they wouldn't see us because after having watched the [chaotic] evacuation from Danang and Cam Ranh Bay, I had this feeling that we were taking poor people who probably were going to be alright, who the regime on top wasn't going to touch very much. They would not be taken away from a life they knew . . . and transplanted someplace, which I didn't think was the most humane thing to do. So in my view and I was sort of left to my own devices, at least to begin with on this, we were to only take those aboard who (a) wouldn't hurt the operation of the ship—in other words, they wouldn't swamp the ship—and (b) that if we didn't take them aboard they'd probably die. If they had the means to get back to shore, we would tell them to go home.

About this time [2 May] we got a set of strict orders from the JCS to stop. Apparently they got panicky back in Washington as they realized the number of people that we were taking off. We were reporting it. Even with my restrictive guidelines, they said to stop picking up people. My P-3s going around looking saw evidence that there were quite a few people out there floating around. So I said [to Admiral Weisner], “Gee, this is inhumane. I think we ought to sweep the area and pick up any mariners, any people who are in distress out there, where they're obviously about to die. We need to do this quickly.” There was a pause on the line, and Admiral Weisner came back and said, “You may do that from the air.” And I kept two ships in there. The problem didn't turn out to be really as severe as I expected. [Ultimately, some of the Vietnamese were rescued [by passing

merchantmen; others put back into port.] Some of them may have just plain perished. . . . And some, a few we picked up. But the thing kind of wound down after five or six days. They realized that we were gone, and people didn't set out from the coast anymore.

At least, not many. But stragglers did appear for some time. On 7 May, a P-3 spotted a Cambodian patrol boat and two other craft laden with 713 refugees. On 8 May, Sailors from the guided-missile escort *Ramsey* (DEG-2) boarded the vessels and broke out the U.S. flag prior to ushering them to a Philippine harbor. From Singapore alone during the two weeks following the fall of South Vietnam, 23 ships with 6,289 refugees left port. Most of the craft headed for Guam, although some entered Philippine waters.

In spite of rigid orders from higher authority, flexibility remained the standard operating procedure for Task Force 76 when dealing with so many additional asylum seekers. When *Midway* anchored off U-Tapao to embark South Vietnamese aircraft flown to Thailand, a boatload of refugees approached the carrier asking for assistance. Because of the JCS order directing cessation of all rescue operations, Vice Admiral Steele ordered "1. Boarding of refugees in international waters in USN ships is authorized only in cases of dire emergency. 2. Under no circumstances will refugees be taken aboard in the territorial waters of another state." Yet when the Vietnamese boat began taking on water in heavy seas, the circumstances were "evaluated as a humanitarian situation," and the carrier took the 84 South Vietnamese aboard.



NHHC

On 8 May 1975, Sailors from USS *Ramsey* (DEG-2) boarded a Cambodian patrol boat and two other vessels laden with refugees, re-flagged them, and escorted them to the Philippines.



NHHC VN Collection

Former South Vietnamese and Cambodian navy ships shown on 31 May 1975 tied up at buoy #1 in Subic Bay, Philippines, after bringing in refugees. They are (left to right): Vietnam Navy *HQ-471*, *Dong Da II* (07), *Chi Lang II* (08), *Chi Linh* (11); and Cambodian ships *P-112* and *E-312*.



NHFC VN Collection

A Navy doctor cares for a Vietnamese woman ill after the long, arduous sea passage from South Vietnam to the Philippines in May 1975.

SUCCOR IN THE PHILIPPINES AND GUAM

A larger challenge to the U.S. government lay in finding host countries for the expatriates. Even before Frequent Wind, South Vietnamese had flowed into the Subic Bay naval base, the principal U.S. Navy installation in the Philippines. By 28 April, almost 5,000 evacuees filled the center established for them at Grande Island. Following the fall of Saigon, Rear Admiral Whitmire, commander of Task Force 76, estimated the number of all the evacuees aboard U.S. Navy, MSC, or Vietnam Navy vessels at 80,000; a CINCPAC estimate on 3 May pegged the number slightly lower: “approximately 70,000 refugees currently on water in USN/MSC/VNN ships.” The Philippines government did not roll out the welcome mat. Afraid of being overwhelmed with indigents and uncertain about the shape of the new order in Southeast Asia, Manila refused initially to allow evacuees to debark, a policy acceded to by the JCS, which ordered the refugee vessels to sail right on to Guam. As Vice Admiral Steele remembered his protest to Admiral Weisner:

These ships are coming in and they're overloaded and their conditions onboard are bad, and people are liable to die. We are seeing evidence of this, and I think this is an inhumane policy that I can't believe is intended by the JCS, and here's the way I think the policy ought to be. . . . But I also suggested that it would be considered to be a racial thing in the United States if we treated Vietnamese, as far as their physical safety and health were concerned, in a way different than we treated Americans and generally white citizens. Any command structure . . . is always, if it's operating properly, a medium for the exchange of orders and complaints about the orders. . . . It's a form of legitimate insubordination, if you will.

In the end, a way was found to bring the refugees ashore in the Philippines with the concurrence of President Ferdinand Marcos. To avert problems

with the Philippines government while providing the refugees with much needed relief, the U.S. Ambassador to the Philippines, William H. Sullivan, proposed hoisting the U.S. flag over the South Vietnamese vessels a day before they reached Subic Bay. CINCPAC and the Seventh Fleet commander agreed. As the refugee vessels neared Philippine waters, Marine security teams boarded them and brought them into port as U.S. ships with a U.S. Navy officer in command of each one, thus “ending anticlimactically a portion of the South Vietnamese Navy” and reincorporating the U.S.-built ships into U.S. custody. In a formal ceremony, the last South Vietnamese CNO, Vice Admiral Chung Tan Cang, handed over command of his flotilla to the American commander of Destroyer Squadron 23. The refugee flotilla entered Subic Bay on 7 May. Under cover of this fig leaf, the refugees were



Courtesy Liem Bui

Prior to transferring their ship to U.S. custody, officers and men of the Vietnam Navy stand at attention as their nation's flag is lowered for the last time.



NHHC VN Collection

The escort *Ngoc Hoi* (HQ-12), a veteran Vietnam Navy warship that made the transit from Saigon to the U.S. naval base at Subic Bay in the Philippines in May 1975.



NHHC VN Collection

A Navy corpsman treats patients in an ambulance at Subic Bay in the Philippines.



NHHC VN Collection

46 The refugee tent camp at Grand Isle in the Philippines.



NHHC VN Collection

The war is over for these former South Vietnamese and Cambodian naval vessels tied up at the pier in Subic Bay.

allowed a respite at Subic and time ashore while the ships prepared for their journey onward to Guam. The ships equalized their passenger loads and replenished their larders with supplies ranging from water to baby diapers.

At Guam, authorities had for some time braced for the onslaught. On 22 April, the State Department designated the island as the initial safe haven for the refugees. The following day, the Joint Chiefs of Staff directed the establishment of a refugee center in the Orote Point area. Seabees began work immediately constructing a tent city and refurbishing buildings at the unused Asan annex of the Navy's regional medical center.

The first Vietnam evacuees arrived by air on Guam 23 April. While the Seabees cleared land at



NHHC VN Collection

Navy Seabee prepares the ground for a tent city at Orote Point on Guam during May 1975.

Orote Point, Naval Air Station Agana and Naval Station Guam took care of the arrivals, some of whom were put up in military housing, even hotels. But as the refugee flights increased, the thousands of evacuees quickly overwhelmed available facilities as well as the medical and processing personnel. On 25 April, the island got a two-day respite when the State Department ordered the diversion of all refugees to the Philippines and Wake Island, the latter holding 2,113 evacuees by 29 April. By the resumption of flights into Guam on 27 April, Orote Point was open for business with a capacity of 13,000. A rapid expansion of the 340-acre facility allowed it to accommodate up to 50,000 people by 29 April. One refugee remembered, "Tens of thousands of tents stretched in rows in every direction. There'd been



NHHC VN Collection

Vietnamese refugees in the hold of an evacuation ship as it makes port in Guam in May 1975 after weeks at sea. Many of these refugees suffered not only from dehydration but a host of infectious diseases.

A Navy Nurse Hones Her Skills On Guam

IN MAY 1975, EARLY IN HER NURSING CAREER

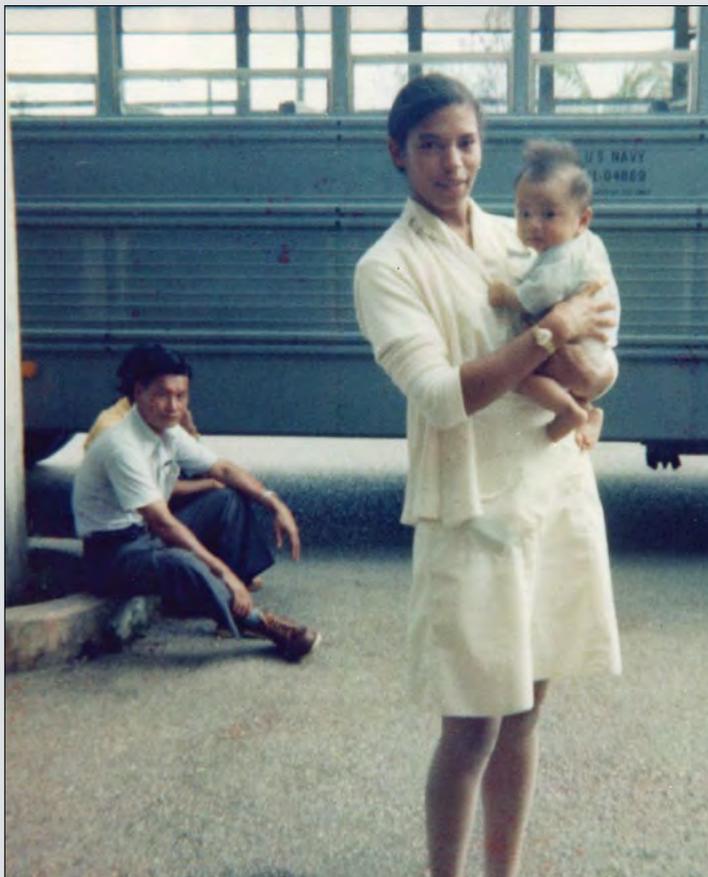
AT the Naval Hospital Philadelphia, Lieutenant (j.g.) Odette Willis, barely 21 years old, suddenly found herself on her way to Guam. Assigned to an acute care surgical unit, she witnessed first-hand the arrival of a ship loaded with Southeast Asian refugees: "When they opened the hatch . . . I saw a sea of people. It looked just like someone had opened a can of worms with body after body tangled together. Some of these vessels had been at sea for 30 days before they got to Guam." A few of the refugees were carrying suitcases full of money, but most were poor. Ranging in age from newborns to centenarians, virtually all were dehydrated and needed immediate medical attention.

"During my first night at the hospital, I put in IVs, inserted Foley catheters, put down naso-gastric

tubes. In fact, I learned more nursing skills the first night I was there than I had in the two years I was at Philadelphia. These people were in frightful condition. They were so dehydrated we were hanging one IV an hour on some of them." Other health problems proved more exotic. One teenage girl "had worms that had actually grown in her lungs, and had been given deworming medication. Whenever she began coughing, you had to grab a pair of gloves and run to help her. A worm was coming up and it was necessary to help pull it out before she choked to death."

As the physical condition of the patients gradually improved, other problems surfaced. Certain unfamiliar foods caused gastric disturbances; hence, the hospital mess served a rice-based diet for "the longest time." Many of the refugees had been separated from their families, and they stood for hours laboriously searching the lists of other camps for the names of relatives. Lieutenant Willis wrote in her journal of two elderly women: "They were walking slowly arm-in-arm up and down the ward. They help each other in and out of bed and tend to each other's needs. Their families, lost in the shuffle of the evacuation and . . . the refugee camps, are gone. And now all they have is each other." The nearby airbases posed a different sort of problem. "Every time a plane landed or took off, it came over the hospital and those people would scatter. They often ended up underneath the beds huddling and scared to death because this was a sound they knew. When a plane came over, it meant a bomb was about to drop on them."

A different sort of challenge to the staff arose when one woman delivered her seventh boy and another her sixth girl. "Just as we were discharging one of the families, we realized that the mother did not have the right baby. We couldn't figure it out so we took the baby back to the nursery. The mother who had given birth to the boy had the girl. The mother with all the girls had the boy. . . . An interpreter told us what was going on. Both



Courtesy Odette Willis

Lieutenant (j.g.) Odette Willis holds a Vietnamese child at Camp Orote on Guam.



Courtesy Odette Willis

Odette Willis, who retired as a captain after 30 years of service, poses for a photo in 1998 with Rear Admiral Joan Marie Engel, Director of the Nurse Corps. The occasion was the 90th anniversary of the Nurse Corps.

mothers had all the same sex children. They didn't want the same sex so they simply swapped them. In their country that would have been perfectly okay. . . . Because the babies were technically born in the United States, we could not allow them to just swap babies so we kept them an extra day and went through a complete adoption process so they could take each other's babies home."

Looking back on that hectic time, Lieutenant (j.g.) Willis recalls "it was one of the most rewarding experiences of my life. Not only did I learn far more nursing than I ever imagined, but helping people who wouldn't

be helped otherwise was a superb experience. It was hard work and long hours in wretched conditions but it was worth it."



NHHC VN Collection

Vietnamese refugees go about their daily activities at a tent encampment on Guam.

little attempt to clear the terrain, which was just red coral mud and brush.” Construction barely kept pace with demand; by 30 April, the number of refugees on Guam reached almost 31,000; on 13 May, that number totaled 50,430.

The emergency stretched resources to the utmost. Providing for the refugees was truly a joint operation with the Army’s 45th Support Group assuming camp command and its 25th Infantry Division erecting field kitchens at the Orote Point site, while the American Red Cross oversaw the distribution of food. With the weather hot and dry and the number of expatriates huge, the U.S. command was compelled to enforce water conservation measures on the refugees and on the Guamanian civilian community. Although most refugees arriving on the island by air were in reasonably good physical condition, the medical burden was still substantial. The Army took responsibility for outpatient care, while the Navy’s Regional Medical

Center concentrated on those with inpatient needs. Personnel flown out from the Navy’s regional medical center in Oakland backed up the Seventh Fleet surgical team. In a later assessment of the Navy’s efforts on Guam, staffers from Senator Edward M. “Ted” Kennedy’s (D-MA) sub-committee on refugees concluded the Navy—and the other armed services—had done well by the evacuees. Vice Admiral Cang echoed this favorable appraisal, saying of the American relief efforts, “They did the most they could to provide assistance to the refugees. Their attitude and capabilities were excellent. No one suspected that so many refugees would be coming at once.”

But Guam had never been intended as anything more than a way station. The ultimate destination for most refugees was the continental United States in what was ultimately dubbed Operation New Life. On 26 April, days before the Saigon evacuation, the JCS directed the armed services designate reception



NIHHC VN Collection

Refugees line up for a meal on Guam.

centers in the United States. Among its facilities, the Navy chose Camp Pendleton and Marine Corps Air Station El Toro, California, and on the East Coast, the naval air stations at Albany, New York, and Glynco, Georgia. By late May almost 50,000 refugees had reached facilities on the U.S. mainland. The State Department also approached, with varying degrees of success, diverse other countries (e.g., Antigua, Canada, Dominica, Ghana, Republic of China) to provide permanent homes for some of the refugees.

As the refugee problem came under control, the forces that conducted Frequent Wind scattered to the four winds. *Midway* steamed to Thai waters to offload her ten Air Force CH/HH-53 helicopters and to take aboard for transportation to the Philippines as many former Vietnam Air Force aircraft as possible. Loading did not go smoothly. Two F-5E aircraft being transferred by helicopter from U-Tapao to the carrier were lost at sea due to sling failure. Eventually *Midway*



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A helicopter prepares to transport a fighter to the carrier *Midway* steaming in the Gulf of Thailand. A South Vietnamese aircrew fleeing Saigon at the end of April 1975 abandoned this Northrop F-5 in Thailand.

departed for the United States with 24 F-5s and 27 A-37s, most brought out to the ship by barge, plus 50 helicopters. Other U.S. warships returned 39 additional helicopters (14 Air America, 25 Vietnam Air Force) to the United States. Meanwhile, as the Seventh Fleet flagship *Oklahoma City* headed for Japan, *Enterprise* and *Hancock* put into Subic Bay where *Hancock* debarked refugees prior to her return to attack carrier status. Originally scheduled for a 16 April return to the West Coast, *Enterprise* steamed for Hawaii on 5 May with 16 of the Marine CH-53 helicopters from *Hancock*. The 9th Marine Amphibious Brigade, formed on 26 March for the evacuation, was formally deactivated on 12 May. The unit's dissolution would be short-lived as events in Southeast Asia once again demanded a U.S. Navy response.



NHHC VN Collection

Shortly after Air Force aircraft doused SS *Mayaguez* with tear gas, an armed U.S. Marine prepares to board the merchant ship from *Harold E. Holt*.

THE RECOVERY OF SS MAYAGUEZ

That same day, Cambodian Communist forces—the Khmer Rouge—fired on and seized the American containership *SS Mayaguez* sailing in international waters in the Gulf of Thailand. The ship's radio operator got off distress calls before the hostile boarders shut down communications. The Khmer Rouge moved the captured ship to an anchorage a mile off the island of Koh Tang, about 34 miles from the Cambodian port of Kompong Som, which has since reverted back to its former name Sihanoukville.



Courtesy Gerald R. Ford Library

President Gerald R. Ford authorized the immediate use of force to recapture *SS Mayaguez* from the Khmer Rouge.

News of the seizure reached Washington in the morning hours of 13 May, and a Navy P-3 Orion quickly spotted *Mayaguez* dead in the water. The patrol plane, hit by one round of small arms fire, saw no sign of the merchantman's crew. Another surveillance aircraft reported later in the day some seamen had been moved to nearby Koh Tang. On 14 May, additional reports reaching Washington indicated the Cambodians had transferred some of the crew to Kompong Som. In fact, unknown to U.S. authorities, the captors moved all of the men to that city on the 14th. Meanwhile, the National Security

Council, meeting in emergency session, called for the U.S. military to forcibly recover the ship and crew. Although this course of action entailed obvious risks, the Ford administration remembered North Korea's 1968 capture of the research ship *Pueblo* (AGER-2) and her crew, who were tortured; U.S. humiliation at the loss that spring of South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia; and fears that the Khmer Rouge, who were even then carrying out large-scale executions of opponents in Phnom Penh, would brutalize the *Mayaguez* seamen. U.S. resolve stiffened further when three U.S. reconnaissance aircraft suffered damage from Communist gunners on Koh Tang, small boats in the area, and on *Mayaguez* herself.

Planners faced the immediate problem that American sea power, now widely dispersed following Frequent Wind, needed to be pulled back to the theater. The closest ships to Cambodia were the destroyer escort *Harold E. Holt* (DE-1074) and the stores ship *Vega* (AF-59); both received orders on 12 May to steam to the scene. The next day, the guided-missile destroyer *Henry B. Wilson*, en route to the Philippines, turned back to Cambodia.



NHHC VN Collection

Washington ordered the destroyer escort *Harold E. Holt*, one of two U.S. naval vessels in the area, to steam at flank speed to the scene of *Mayaguez's* seizure.

guided-missile destroyer *Henry B. Wilson*, en route to the Philippines, turned back to Cambodia. To lend air cover and striking power, *Coral Sea* and her escorts were diverted from a planned Australian visit. Scheduled for a later arrival on 16 May was *Hancock*, undergoing repairs to her engineering plant. The attack carrier would again be flying a substantial complement of rotary-wing aircraft, including 11 of the big CH-53D Sea Stallions. The amphibious assault ship *Okinawa*, doubling back from passage to the island of Okinawa, would reach the scene on 18 May with 23 helicopters.

The Ford administration could count on substantial Air Force strength in the vicinity as well. Based in Thailand were the 40th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron with nine HH-53Cs as well as the 21st Special Operations Squadron with ten CH-53Cs, the latter being tough aircraft with side-mounted multi-barrel guns. Unfortunately, neither Air Force unit was trained in landing troops under hostile fire. As potential compensation, Seventh Air Force assets included A-7D attack aircraft, AC-130 gunships, and OV-10 forward air control aircraft that could provide additional cover for the rescue mission. Commanding these forces was the same officer who had exercised similar control during the Eagle Pull and Frequent Wind operations: Lieutenant General Burns, commander of the U.S. Support Activities Group and commanding general of the Seventh Air Force, with headquarters at Nakhon Phanom Royal Thai Air Force Base.

Because treaty arrangements prohibited the United States from stationing ground units in Thailand, the nearest available troops were Marines in Okinawa and the Philippines. Those men training at Subic Bay went on alert 13 May, and 120 Marines of Battalion Landing Team (BLT) 1/4 departed Cubi Point 14 May aboard U.S. Air Force transports for U-Tapao, Thailand. They were joined quickly by 1,000 Marines of BLT 2/9 who flew in on 15 C-141s from Okinawa, 2,000 miles away. To provide the Marines with tactical airlift, Seventh Air Force CH-53s headed for U-Tapao; one crashed en route, killing 23 men. Despite this loss, by 15 May the Marine troops and the Air Force helicopters, backed by Navy and Air

Force tactical airpower, were ready for action.

As with Eagle Pull and Frequent Wind, command lines of authority for the *Mayaguez* recovery were tangled. CINCPAC (Admiral Weisner) exercised overall administrative control of the forces involved. The local operational coordinating authority was once again Air Force Lieutenant General Burns, but his command post was 400 miles north of the anchored *Mayaguez*. His immediate deputy closer to the scene of impending action was the Airborne Mission Commander (AMC) in the Airborne Command and Control Center (ABCCC), orbiting about 90 miles northwest of Koh Tang. Although Marine and Navy forces were not formally commanded by that officer, they were under his operational control. The previous month, similarly convoluted command arrangements had worked reasonably well; now in May, they were to cause serious problems.

Adding to these command complexities, Washington frequently intervened directly in the ongoing operation. For example, the officer in tactical command on *Harold E. Holt* found himself in constant voice communications with the National Military Command Center at the Pentagon and



Admiral James L. Holloway III, the Chief of Naval Operations in 1975.



NHHC VN Collection

Sailors and Marines returning to *Harold E. Holt* after discovering the merchant ship unoccupied and adrift.

at times he spoke directly with Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Holloway.

On the morning of 14 May, the 120 men of BLT 1/4 divided into six boarding teams and rehearsed the next day's planned assault of *Mayaguez* on a schematic of the ship chalked onto the surface of a parking lot in U-Tapao. Simultaneous with this operation, on the morning of 15 May, other BLT 1/4 Marines would storm Koh Tang Island while carrier planes bombarded Kompong Som and Koh Tang. Lacking sufficient aircraft for all the tasks assigned them, Air Force helicopters would have to transfer the Marines to *Harold E. Holt* and then move on Koh Tang. The Marines slated to board *Mayaguez* would have to do so from the deck of the warship.

Steaming at 25 knots, *Harold E. Holt* received orders on 13 May to proceed at flank speed to reach

the scene in the early morning hours of 15 May. Although the ship's machinery under this sustained maximum load was suspect, what broke was the *Henry E. Holt's* 5-inch, 54-caliber MK 45 gun mount during test firing. Lacking essential spare parts, the ship's fire control technicians ingeniously fabricated a replacement for a faulty piece of gear. The destroyer escort reached the scene with her main armament fully operational.

In the dawn hours of 15 May, *Harold E. Holt* rendezvoused with three hovering Air Force helicopters that lowered 68 men onto her pitching deck. Following a run by two Air Force A-7s that drenched *Mayaguez* with tear gas, *Harold E. Holt* came alongside the container ship. For the first time in many years, the command rang out: "Marines over the side." Wearing gas masks, the boarding detachment



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After hoisting the American flag, the Marines and Sailors from *Henry B. Holt* prepared the container ship for towing while six MSC volunteers from USNS *Greenville Victory* restored emergency diesel power to the ship's plant.



NHHC VN Collection

Merchant mariners from SS *Greenville Victory* discuss with Commander Robert A. Peterson, commanding officer of *Harold E. Holt*, how they will prepare SS *Mayaguez* for a tow.



NHHC VN Collection

Harold E. Holt with SS *Mayaguez* under tow.



NHHC VN Collection

Marines disembark from a CH-53 on the island of Koh Tang on 15 May 1975.

THE BATTLE FOR KOH TANG

Far less successful in its outcome was the operation against Koh Tang. While preparing to assault the island, planners were operating in a vacuum. Initially, they lacked decent maps and aerial photographs of the terrain. Worse, intelligence estimates regarding the Communist forces on the scene varied significantly, positing at one extreme an enemy force of a mere 20 militiamen to Pacific Command's warning of more than 200 regular troops equipped with "recoilless rifles, mortars, and machine guns." Unhappily, the latter estimate never reached the Marine assault force who believed they faced a small garrison of irregulars. Given the tenacity of the resistance U.S. forces ultimately encountered, the American ground commander later calculated the enemy force consisted of about 150 professional soldiers well-armed with heavy infantry weapons.

Despite the significant uncertainties concerning the enemy on Koh Tang, the command authority, vested in the Seventh Air Force at Nakhom Phanom, did not delay the Marine attack until more precise information or combat support could be made available. Close to the scene or available within a few hours were the air group of the approaching carrier *Coral Sea*, the 5-inch, 54-caliber MK 42 guns on *Harold E. Holt* and *Henry B. Wilson*, as well as AC-130 Spectre attack aircraft based in Thailand. But when the first wave of 180 men on eight Air Force helicopters (five CH-53s and three HH-53s) approached the Koh Tang landing zones, none of these supporting assets were immediately available. Thus, the big helicopters flew into the teeth of an enemy unmolested by any sort of preparatory bombardment. Fierce fire from the ground shot down the first three helicopters; 14 men died. Three more aircraft suffered major damage shortly thereafter. Of the 180 servicemen in the helicopters, only 131 were inserted successfully.

Throughout the morning, enemy weapons pinned down the Americans ashore; *Henry B.*

Wilson moved in close to Koh Tang and rescued 13 survivors from one of the helicopters that crashed in the water. Shortly after noon, five Air Force helicopters brought in 127 reinforcements from BLT 2/9, but ground fire flared so intensely only four aircraft could disembark their 100 troops.

Following the loss of the first three helicopters, the Air Force dispatched AC-130 gunships to Koh Tang. When the lead aircraft arrived, it identified itself to the beleaguered Marines and fired



Smoke rises from a warehouse in the Cambodian port of Kompong Som (formerly Sihanoukville), bombed by aircraft from the attack carrier *Coral Sea*.

several spotting rounds, followed by a 105mm projectile that demolished a Khmer Rouge bunker. This shot prompted the Marine communicator to exclaim, "Jesus Christ, what was that? Have I got targets for you!"

Concurrently, *Coral Sea* began launching the 61 sorties that over the course of the day hit targets around Kompong Som, including a rail yard, port facilities, a refinery, and an airfield. Bombs and cannon fire from Navy A-7 Corsairs and A-6

Henry B. Wilson (DDG-7)

PLAYING AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN THE EVACUATION

from South Vietnam and the recovery of *Mayaguez* and her crew was the guided-missile destroyer *Henry B. Wilson*. One of the 23 *Charles F. Adams*-class destroyers built during the 1955–1961 tenure of Chief of Naval Operations Arleigh A. Burke, *Henry B. Wilson*, like others in the class, was a capable ship despite its relatively small size (4,500 tons at full load). Armament included two 5-inch, 54-caliber MK 42 gun mounts for shore bombardment and surface ship combat. The ship boasted a potent short-range anti-aircraft capability with its Tartar surface-to-air missile launcher. To counter submarines, the destroyer featured keel-mounted sensors, six 12.75-inch torpedo tubes, and an 8-cell antisubmarine rocket (ASROC) launcher. Because of their small size, the *Charles F. Adams*-class destroyers could not house aircraft, but helicopters could deliver supplies at a specially designated station on the fantail. Handsome ships, they proved especially stable and maneuverable. Crews appreciated their relatively spacious accommodations and the air conditioning in all living and working spaces. The 1,200-lb high-pressure steam plants produced 70,000 horsepower, giving the warships a rated maximum of 31.5 knots, a speed frequently exceeded in practice.

Henry B. Wilson enjoyed several distinctions. The firm of Defoe Shipbuilding at Bay City, Michigan, won the contract for the destroyer as the *St. Lawrence*



NHHC VN Collection

The guided-missile destroyer *Henry B. Wilson* underway in 1975.

Seaway was being finished. When laid down in February 1958, *Henry B. Wilson* was the largest warship constructed at that time on the Great Lakes. On 22 April 1959, she became the first vessel of her size to be side-launched. Completed in the fall of 1960, *Henry B. Wilson* left Defoe's yard just before ice closed the seaway for the winter. After transiting the 15 locks between Lake Erie and the sea, the ship arrived on schedule in Boston for the commissioning ceremony 17 December.



NHHC VN Collection

A Navy A-7 Corsair II prepares for a carrier launch with a full load of ordnance.

Intruders destroyed three aircraft and numerous small buildings at the Phumi Phsar Ream naval base. Another four A-7Es sank a small Khmer Rouge navy patrol craft. In addition to these strike duties, *Coral Sea* aircraft flew photo reconnaissance and combat air patrol missions plus four helicopter sorties in support of the extraction of the ground force on Koh Tang. By the end of the engagement, the attack carrier was only ten miles from the island.

During the afternoon, *Henry B. Wilson*, aided by OV-10 forward air control aircraft, fired 157 5-inch rounds to support the Marines on the eastern side of

In the summer of 1965, *Henry B. Wilson* began almost a decade of service in Southeast Asia. Steaming in the Gulf of Tonkin, the destroyer protected the aircraft carriers at Yankee Station and used her artillery to pound North Vietnamese coastal installations as part of Operation Sea Dragon. The warship completed seven deployments to the Southeast Asian combat theater.



NHHC VN Collection

Smoke rounds fired by *Henry B. Wilson* on the eastern side of Koh Tang enabled a Marine platoon to board Air Force helicopters for the withdrawal from the deadly island. The ship's 5-inch guns put rounds ashore at key times during the engagement.

Koh Tang. One airman later remembered, "I guess most of us in the Air Force aren't aware of just how well the Navy can thread the needle on precision gunfire. The Navy started walking rounds in some distance to the right of one of the gun positions. The Marines were making five-meter adjustments on the naval gunfire. That Navy destroyer . . . was literally able, by a succession of shots, to walk its rounds right into the machine gun positions. A number of . . . positions were knocked out this way." The Marines were extracted by helicopter, while the destroyer operated to divert the enemy's attention. *Harold E. Holt* could not join this action because the

The destroyer made a significant contribution during the *Mayaguez* operation, right after taking part in Operation Frequent Wind. On 13 May, as the ship and her crew headed to the Philippines for well-deserved liberty, they received orders to reverse course and steam for Cambodian waters. The destroyer joined the fight off Koh Tang, bombarding Khmer Rouge forces on the island with her 5-inch guns and rescuing 13 crewmen whose helicopter had been downed. To pull those men from the water, *Henry B. Wilson* Sailors approached the hostile shore in the ship's gig and traded small arms fire with the enemy. The Navy awarded four Sailors the Bronze Star medal for their bravery. In a fitting climax to a hectic day, *Henry B. Wilson* intercepted the Thai fishing craft carrying the crew of *Mayaguez*, took the merchant mariners on board, and returned the grateful men to their now-liberated ship. *Henry B. Wilson* was decommissioned on 2 October 1989, which capped the warship's distinguished career.

destroyer escort was fully committed to the boarding and later towing of *Mayaguez*.

The combat on 15 May occurred after the Phnom Penh government was already backing away from the confrontation with the United States. That morning, the Khmer Rouge military had loaded the crew of *Mayaguez* aboard a Thai fishing vessel and sent it seaward. Alerted by a P-3 patrol plane, *Henry B. Wilson* intercepted this craft and placed the 40 merchant sailors back aboard *Mayaguez*, at that point under tow by *Harold E. Holt*. By evening *Mayaguez* was manned by her own crew and steaming in international waters under her own power.

Henry B. Wilson remained on the scene until 18 May to support the recovery of U.S. dead; two days later the destroyer entered Subic Bay.

Shortly after the second wave of helicopters deposited their Marines on Koh Tang, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, learning of the recovery of *Mayaguez* and the release of the crew, ordered all offensive action halted and the forces fighting on Koh Tang extracted. This retrograde movement proved as tough to execute as had the morning insertions. Of the five helicopters that plucked the Marines from Koh Tang to *Coral Sea* and *Harold E. Holt*, three received major damage. Of the 231 men landed on the island, 227 were evacuated, one was killed in action, and three were inadvertently left behind, to be murdered by the Khmer Rouge. Total fatalities in the operation were 14 Marines, two Sailors, and two airmen. Seventy men suffered wounds (mostly burns and lacerations) of sufficient seriousness to require treatment aboard *Coral Sea*. Of the 21 helicopters that took small arms fire during the operation, 13 were lost or damaged. So overwhelmed were the rotary-wing aircraft that some after-action defense analysts questioned the very utility of amphibious helicopter assault in future military operations.

A closer look at the evidence moderated this skepticism. One of the most careful assessments of the assault on Koh Tang was prepared by the Center for Naval Analyses (CNA) that concluded the losses were attributable not to any inherent vulnerability in helicopters, but rather to a host of other factors. The CNA report addressed the command and control issue guardedly: "A Joint Commander of a small operation becomes involved in details that normally would be left to component commanders in larger operations. This factor should be carefully considered before designating a commander of a joint operation when the major mission area lies outside his service experience." More specifically, the CNA report concluded the command and control system was too centralized (with the reins held by Seventh Air Force) and the on-scene commander (ABCCC) remained too far removed from the action to properly control the air and naval forces under his oversight. Other flaws included the lack of an effective

forward air controller until late in the operation; the limited training of the Air Force helicopters performing the vertical envelopment mission; and the late use of powerful naval assets, including the guns on board *Henry B. Wilson* and *Harold E. Holt* and the attack aircraft of *Coral Sea*. In reality, then, the *Mayaguez* rescue effort, although ostensibly successful, sounded a distinctly sour note when compared to Eagle Pull and Frequent Wind.

In those earlier operations, the U.S. military, especially the Navy and Marine Corps, demonstrated extraordinary professional skill in carrying out large-scale and complicated evacuations. Given the public's contemporary skepticism of American servicemen at the tail end of the Vietnam War, this performance seems at first glance surprising. But despite the undeniable litany of woes afflicting the military in 1975—racial tensions, counterculture sentiment, drug abuse, the lower quality of recruits—the record compiled by these Americans in uniform showed that not all was dark, that the services retained a solid core of competent and dedicated people, and that with proper nurturing, the armed forces could be restored to health, as they were in the 1980s.

In fact, the performance of these military personnel in April 1975 was a harbinger of the future. Despite a tangled command structure and amid an atmosphere of intense crisis and extreme danger, American Sailors, Marines, and airmen saved tens of thousands of people with a minimal loss of life. In the subsequent Operation New Life, military men and women pitched in to help unfortunate refugees make the transition to homes on U.S. soil. If the public's view of the final collapse in Southeast Asia is one of unalloyed tragedy, then that jaundiced assessment needs to be leavened with a tribute to those Americans who carried out their duties so well and in such trying circumstances.



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Major Raymond E. Porter and another Marine raise the Stars and Stripes over SS *Mayaguez*.

Acronyms

ABCCC	Airborne Command and Control Center
AMC	Airborne Mission Commander
ARVN	Army of the Republic of Vietnam
ASROC	Antisubmarine Rocket
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CINCPAC	Commander in Chief, U.S. Pacific Command
CNA	Center for Naval Analyses
DAO	Defense Attaché Office
GI	Government Issue
GSF	Ground Security Force
JCS	Joint Chiefs of Staff
LCU	Utility Landing Craft
LPH	Amphibious Assault Ship
LST	Tank Landing Ship
MACV	Military Assistance Command Vietnam
MSC	Military Sealift Command
PACAF	Pacific Air Forces
VNAF	Vietnam Air Force
VNN	Vietnam Navy
XO	Executive Officer

The Author



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Acknowledgments

I am especially grateful to Rear Admiral Samuel Cox, USN (Ret.), director of the Naval History and Heritage Command, for his unstinting support of this project and Dr. Edward J. Marolda, series co-editor, who was instrumental in bringing this booklet to fruition. Equally deserving of my thanks are Admiral Bruce Demars, USN (Ret.); Vice Admiral Robert P. Dunn, USN (Ret.); and Captain Todd Creekman, USN (Ret.), distinguished leaders of the Naval Historical Foundation who enthusiastically endorsed this effort to recognize the service and sacrifice in Vietnam of our naval personnel and the Navy's vital contribution to the war effort. Former Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage; Captain Odette Willis (NC), USN (Ret.); Captain Paul Jacobs, USN (Ret.); Liem Bui; Craig Compiano; Jan Herman; and Hugh Doyle graciously provided their personal images for use in this booklet. The staff members of the Naval History and Heritage Command who helped publish this booklet include editors Debra Barker, Andrea Connell, and Amy Carfagno; photo archivists Lisa Crunk and David Colamaria; and art curators Gale Munro, Pamela Overmann, and Karen Haubold. I thank Kara Newcomer of Marine Corps History Division for her help in the photo and map selection process. Finally, I am grateful to Dr. John Sherwood, an historian of the NHHC, and Jan Herman, former historian of the Navy's Bureau of Medicine and Surgery, for their insightful reviews of the manuscript.

Publisher's Note

The Naval History and Heritage Command extends a grateful thank you to the Naval Historical Foundation for making the U.S. Navy and the Vietnam War series possible. They generously sponsored not only the author's work on this book, but also the subsequent editorial services that helped make it a reality. The NHHC is grateful for the NHF's support and its dedication to telling the story of this important era in the Navy's history.

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DEPARTMENT OF THE NAVY
WASHINGTON, DC

www.history.navy.mil

ISBN 978-0-945274-92-6

