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SIR

I hope this might be of some help to you. I returned to Viet Nam two more times, once in 1965 when I was hurt in or by Rocket Fire and once in 1969 with a weather modification group trying to flood out the Mekong River trail to deny usage bring supplies south

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A Passage to Freedom

Dr. Ron B. Franklin Jr.

I was surprised to get your information and request about my experience during the U.S. Navy's "Operation Passage To Freedom." It happened a long time ago 47 years to be exact. It is very hard for me to remember dates, places, ships, and people but I gave it my best shot. I have been involved in two or three other operations taking place in China in 1949, and Korea in 1950-51, as well as others on different ships and circumstances.

Operation Passage to Freedom moved almost a million people from North Vietnam to South Vietnam. We had up to 65 ships (some from other countries as well) involved during a four to six month period of time. Our ships that participated in the operation were transports, cargo ships, Oilers LST's, LSD's, ARL's, a hospital ship and others that I don't recall.

This last week I have done some research of my own on this operation and was surprised at how little there is regarding this operation. I looked into the Navy History and Library of Congress and other places of information. I found out that the operation lasted longer than I realized.

I got to thinking about it and I did not feel the Communists were aggressive towards us, but they weren't happy about the French and the English. I don't blame the civilian population for leaving when they had the chance. This is just some of my own personal thoughts about the situation. Below I have listed all your questions along with my answers. I hope this will be of some help to you with your research.

1. What ship did you serve on during Operation Passage to Freedom?

USS ESTES AGC-12 (AMPHIBIOUS GROUP COMMANDER FLAGSHIP)

2. Do you recall the names/numbers of other ship/craft involved in the operation (I ask to ensure that none are left out of this history)

I looked at your list and I can't remember ships that are not on your list already. The list on your website looks complete. There were some ground troops with the Marines as well. I don't remember what unit number it was but there was around 100 troopers that also participated in this mission

3. What were your years of service in the United States Navy? 1948-1978

4. What rank did you hold during Operation Passage to Freedom?

Radioman 2nd class

5. Where was your ship deployed when you heard about your future participation in Operation Passage to Freedom? I believe we were in Yosuka, Japan

6. How aware were you of the situation in Indochina when your ship received its orders to participate in Operation Passage to Freedom? I was not very aware of the situation other than the French were trying to flee after the situation in Den Ben Pho and they were tired of the war

7. What was your primary area of responsibility during Operation Passage to Freedom? (Did it change as the refugees come aboard?) I was in the communications attached to the flag allowance and my job was unaffected by the refugees coming aboard

8. What type of preparation did your ship make as it assumed its role in Operation Passage to Freedom? Our ship was the command ship for this operation. We were responsible for the communications with all the ships involved in this mission. We also were responsible for preparing and loading aboard all the logistics needed for a long deployment.

9. Once you arrived in North Vietnam, what was the role for your ship? We were the command ship and controlled ship movement logistics.

10. How did those officials on the shore treat your arrival? I never had any contact with any officials on shore.

11. Did you ever travel ashore in North Vietnam? If so, what were the conditions like? Yes, I did travel. I was chosen along with 10 to 12 other enlisted men and two officers for an assignment that took us to Hanoi by rail. We spent three days loading the Consulate equipment as well as about 100 people associated with the Consulate and then went on by rail to Haiphong. My job was to guard the classified boxes of material. The train we rode on had bullet holes in it but none were put there while we were aboard. Our

ship had already left port when we arrived back so we had to load our equipment and people on a LST to transport us to Saigon where we rejoined our ship.

12. How did the refugees board your ship? All the refugees had to board our ship via the gangways.

13. Describe the general condition of the refugees when they first entered your ship:
Appearance; Health; Wealth; Emotion

The refugees seemed very scared and hungry and men and women seemed to be dressed somewhat alike. I could not distinguish if any were wealthy or not they all looked the same. Everyone had all their belongings they could carry in suitcases or backpacks. Even the kids had bundles on their backs. There was continuous chatter amongst them all the time. We really couldn't understand them much at all.

14. How did these refugees respond to you? I never had much contact with them and the LST that we were riding on was a mess when we arrived and unloaded the refugees.

15. If your ship participated in more than one trip, did the refugees respond any differently in the latter trips? The Estes made two trips and we never carried very many refugees as we were the command ship.

16. How did you handle the language barrier? I never talked to them and could not understand their language.

17. Did any refugees communicate in English or another language? Not that I ever heard

18. If any of the refugees feared being aboard, how did you ease these fears?

I think they were happy to get some rice and a safe place to sleep

19. Were your preparations adequate to the needs of the refugees? (Did you have to improvise?) I think we were kind of overwhelmed as we had never prepared for a mission such as this and didn't know what to expect.

20. Did the refugees' attitudes toward you and your shipmates change as the trip neared completion? I never had much contact with the refugees so I don't really know.

21. Where did the refugees disembark? Most of the refugees went to Saigon and Tourane (Danang). Some ended up in Hong Kong and Singapore.

22. What were the conditions of this place? I only got to Saigon in the south and they all basically looked the same.

23. As your ship made its 2nd, 3rd, 4th, etc. trip back to North Vietnam, did you and your shipmates adjust the way you performed your duties? It was pretty much the same for us. 8 hours on 8 hours off, eating, sleeping, and communications watches. I was a supervisor and part of my job was to copy press (CW) and I also did some CW message sending. We always had 10-15 circuits going all the time and handled between 200 and 300 messages a day.

24. Were there any births/deaths during the trip(s)? None that I was aware of.

25. Were there any Viet Minh attempts to thwart your mission? The only incident that I know of took place in Saigon. Someone threw a grenade into a bar that exploded and wounded a couple of sailors.

26. What was the general attitude of the crew during Operation Passage to Freedom?

Most of the crews attitude was pretty good. Everyone just wanted to get it over with so we could go back to Japan or the Phillipines.

27. Where there any crew members who disagree with the majority of the shipmates?

I'm not sure what you mean but I imagine things were different maybe on ships that had more contact with refugees but ours being a command ship hardly dealt with them and our ship was less affected.

28. Did any individual(s) stand out during Operation Passage to Freedom? No

29. Did you ever meet Dr. Thomas Dooley during Operation Passage to Freedom? If so, what was your impression of him?

I did not meet the man nor did I know of the man until later years through articles that I had read.

30. What feelings/emotions did you take away from your participating in the operation?

I just felt that the mission dragged on for a long time and I was very anxious for it to end.

31. Would you characterize Operation Passage to Freedom as a success or failure? (If you could turn back the clock and were given the chance to do it all over again would you?)

I felt the operation was a success at the time but 20 years later it was like we did all of this and nothing really changed that much. I kind of feel that 55,000 of our people died for nothing in the end.

32. Did your participation in Operation Passage to Freedom heighten your awareness of South Vietnam/South Vietnamese politics? At the time I wasn't as aware of what was going on until after I read alot more on South East Asia.

33. Are there any additional memories, stories, or history you would like to include about Operation Passage to Freedom that I have not addressed?

I feel that all the asian people do not appreciate all the efforts, sweat, money and lives it cost and they will continue to be a restless civilization. I believe that it was that I hope none of my children, grandchildren, or future family members will have to experience. Thinking back now I feel we could have won the war but the South lost their will to win and we couldn't support them any longer if they weren't willing to make their own sacrafices.

34. Do you know any other participants who would agree to an oral history interview?

I have not kept in contact with anyone else that participated in this Operation.

Thank You

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