

Carl Benning Written Responses to Questions

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

USS Menard APA 201. The Menard was the first ship to participate in Operation Passage to Freedom.

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 understand that there were 18 transport ships involved in the Operation. I did look at ships listed at your web site and every APA that I can remember is already included in your list as well as a lot of other ship types that I didn't remember.

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

June 1953 to August 1957

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

Ensign (I was 23 years old at the time)

5. Where was your ship deployed when you heard about your future participation in Operation Passage to Freedom?

We were enroute to Hong Kong for R&R when our orders were changed. Our new orders told us to proceed to Hai Phong to pick up Catholic refugees and take them to Saigon. The change in our orders came on Aug. 8, 1954 when we were about 24 hours from Hong Kong.

6. How aware were you of the situation in Indochina when your ship received its orders to participate in Operation Passage to Freedom?

Vaguely aware

7. What was your primary area of responsibility during Operation Passage to Freedom? (Did it change as the refugees come aboard?)

I was the 1st Division Officer and was responsible for the landing craft (LCVPs) on the Menard. I held this job throughout the 3 trips we made from Hai Phong to Saigon. The Menard's participation in the Operation ended on Sept. 5, 1954.

8. What type of preparation did your ship make as it assumed its role in Operation Passage to Freedom?

When we entered the area near Hai Phong we went on Condition III alert status. This required us to continuously man the 40mm guns and be ready to fight. We had live ammunition in ready service storage at the gun mounts and no smoking was permitted.

9. Once you arrived in North Vietnam, what was the role for your ship?

We were the first ship to arrive and we anchored about 3 to 4 miles off shore and we waited for the French to bring the refugees out to the ship. As I recall, we waited a day or so before the refugees arrived by boat.

10. How did those officials on the shore treat your arrival?

I don't recall any problems with the French authorities, however, being an Ensign I didn't have any interface duties.

11. Did you ever travel ashore in North Vietnam? If so, what were the conditions like?

No, I don't recall anyone going ashore. Hai Phong was hostile territory.

12. How did the refugees board your ship?

The French brought them out in landing craft type boats. I believe they were LCI boats. There were about 100 refugees packed in the well-deck of the boat. We lowered a steel ladder (weighed about two tons) into the well-deck and the refugees climbed up the ladder to get aboard the Menard. There were about 30 steps in the ladder. The ladder had a roller at the bottom that allowed it to roll in the well-deck of the refugee boat when it moved up and down as sea swells moved by. One old Vietnamese man got his foot crushed when the ladder rolled over his foot as a swell moved by. The old man must have been used to pain since he didn't cry out when it happened. Our ship's doctor (last name Hill I believe) did his best to fix the old man's foot. I don't recall if he was successful.

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

They were in need of a bath but they seemed happy to be going to Saigon. They were a mixture of men, women and children. The ages of the men and women varied between nursing infants to very old.

14. How did these refugees respond to you?

They didn't give me any problems.

15. If your ship participated in more than one trip, did the refugees respond any differently in the latter trips?

We made three trips and as I recall all three groups behaved about the same.

16. How did you handle the language barrier?

I wasn't required to communicate with the refugees except to stop them from cooking food (in small wood burning cookers) in the living quarters. I used hand signs to get them to put out the cooking fires. We had to regularly inspect (about twice per 4 hour watch) the living spaces to make sure there were no safety hazards. They also tried to use the urinals to wash in; we would stop them whenever we saw them doing it. When we went into their living spaces (an Officer and an Enlisted man team) we both carried a 45 pistol. The odor in their living spaces was really bad so that we did the inspection as fast as we could. The ship was designed to carry about 1200 troops and we had about 2100 refugees on each trip to Saigon.

17. Did any refugees communicate in English or another language?

I don't recall if the refugees spoke any English. They were accompanied by Catholic priests who could speak English.

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

I didn't observe any refugees in fear.

19. Were your preparations adequate to the needs of the refugees? (Did you have to improvise?)

I don't recall any specific problems keeping the refugees fed while they were aboard the ship.

20. Did the refugees' attitudes toward you and your shipmates change as the trip neared completion?

The trip from Hai Phong to Saigon took about 2.5 to 3 days. The refugees did seem a bit more relaxed by the second day at sea.

21. Where did the refugees disembark?

In Saigon. We steamed up the Saigon River right into the city. As the refugees left the ship we gave each one of them a small bag of rice which they were happy to receive. After the refugees departed several French Public Health people would come aboard and fumigate the vacated living spaces.

22. What were the conditions of this place?

They were typical of a water front area - a little on the grungy side.

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?

As we got more experienced and knew what to expect, we got better at doing the job.

24. Were there any births/deaths during the trip(s)?

I believe there were 2 or 3 deaths total on our three trips.

25. Were there any Viet Minh attempts to thwart your mission?

No

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

The ship's company lived apart from the refugees so that there weren't any attitude problems that I can recall.

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

I don't recall.

28. Did any individual(s) stand out during Operation Passage to Freedom?

I don't remember anyone doing anything exceptional except perhaps the ship's doctor. He and his corpsman worked very hard taking care of the refugee's health problems. I recall the doctor saying that he got to treat some tropical diseases that he would never see in a practice in the US.

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

No.

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

I felt sorry for these people being uprooted and moved. All they had was what they carried with them and the bag of rice that we gave them.

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?)

It was successful in the sense that we accomplished our goal of moving refugees from Hai Phong to Saigon. It was our duty to carry out US foreign policy and I would do it again. However, from a political point of view, I am not so sure it was successful after seeing how the Vietnam War turned out.

32. Did your participation in Operation Passage to Freedom heighten your awareness of South Vietnam/South Vietnamese politics?

Not at the time but it did later.

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

The historical record says that the Menard (the Old Champ as we affectionately called Her) made three runs and transported a total of 6341 refugees. However, this number of refugees is probably in error by a small amount. The reason I believe this is true is because I was given the task of counting the refugees as they came up the ladder and boarded the ship. I had borrowed a "Cell Counter" from one of the Corpsman to use for counting job. The counter had a push-button on it - each push of the button increased the counter reading by one. As the refugees came aboard some of the women would have babies and small children hanging all over them. As they came aboard I was pushing the counter button fast and furious to keep up with the number coming aboard. I am reasonably sure I probably didn't get them all counted.

It was about a three hour trip from the mouth of the Saigon River to Saigon (or Ho Chi Minh City as it is now called). We picked up a French River pilot at the mouth of the river to help us navigate up the river to Saigon. He took the Menard up the river at about 12 knots which is pretty fast for a ship the size of the Menard particularly when operating in a constrained-space river environment. At 12 knots the Menard creates a significant bow wave. Our bow wave caused a lot of damage to the small shacks built along the river banks. I am reasonably sure we didn't make a good impression on the Vietnamese people living near the river banks. However, it was the French pilot who was controlling the ship and he was oblivious to the damage our bow wave was doing.

Many of the refugees chewed a root that I believe was called "beetle-nut" I am not sure of the spelling). This root turned their teeth black. When they smiled they looked strange to someone used to seeing white teeth. Most of the refugees also dressed in black clothes so that their teeth matched their clothes.

The heat and humidity around Saigon produced an environment that was conducive to the growth of fungus of various types. For example, I had a wrist watch that I received as a gift when I graduated from the US Naval Academy (1953). The watch had a leather band that, unfortunately, supported the growth of a green fungus. I finally had to replace the leather band with a metal watch band to get rid of the fungus.

I don't remember much about the city of Saigon. We were granted liberty while we were there and I am sure I must have gone ashore but I don't recall any events while I was on liberty. Maybe my shipmates can supply you with some information about the city of Saigon when Operation Passage to Freedom was going on.

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

No, but there is a web site that discusses the role of the Sea Bees in Operation Passage to Freedom. The address is: www.seabeecook.com/history/Vietnam/passage_to_freedom.htm