

Don Bright - Written answers to Questions

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

USS Menard APA 201

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)

USS Menard, USS Bayfield, USS Mountrail, USS Algol and USS Montague

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

Nov 1952-Nov 1956 and July 1961-July 1964

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

Radioman 3rd class

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

We were in the far East and on our way to Hong Kong for R and R

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

No knowledge. We were the first ship to arrive at the Hiaphong area and if I remember we were there about 3 weeks waiting on a cease fire. They had to send a tanker to refuel our ship. We made 3 round trips and transported about 6,000 refugees. We then returned to either Korea or Japan, I can't remember and picked up about 1500 Marines and brought them to San Francisco.

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

Radio operator, no change when refugees came aboard

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

Closed off hatches to compartments that would be occupied by the refugees so that we would not have contact with them.

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

We transported about 2,000 refugees on each trip from Hiaphong to Saigon.

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

I did not have contact with any officials.

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

No.

12. How did the refugees board your ship?

The French transported them out to our ship anchored in the harbor at Hiaphong.

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

They appeared to be in fairly good condition.

14. How did these refugees respond to you?

We were told not to have contact with the refugees, but they were friendly.

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

We made 3 round trips and I did not notice any difference.

16. How did you handle the language barrier?

I did not have any need to communicate with them.

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

Don't know.

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

Don't know.

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

As far as I know the preparations were adequated.

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

I can't remember any change.

21. Where did the refugees disembark?

Saigon.

22. What were the conditions of this place?

They looked good.

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?

None that I am aware of, it was very hot and I tried to sleep above out side.

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

A baby died and was buried at sea.

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

None that I am aware of.

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

It was just another job we had to do.

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

None that I am aware of.

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

None that I remember.

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 Dr. Dooley.

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

It was a job that we had to do.

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?)

What we did was successful, I would do it again even if I did not agree as when you are in the military your opinion does not matter.

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

No.

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 bought a Coke and gave it to a small boy and he shared it with everyone in his family. There food consisted of rice and canned fish.

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

I just recently came in contact with some of the ship's crew but I don't know if they would be interested.

Don Cook, e-mail:

Jim Hudson, e-mail:

Terry Foley, e-mail:

I have a few pictures of the French ships bringing refugees out to our ship in the Hiaphong harbor and I will attach them. The top picture is Hiaphong harbor and the two bottom pictures are the French Boats that brought the refugees out to our ship. Also a few pictures of refugees on our ship, we normally only carried about 1500 troops, but we had around 2,000 refugees each trip and they covered all of the main deck top side. The top picture is the boy that I gave a coke to. I have a color copier which might make a better copy of these pictures, if you would like a copy I can send them to you.

Don Bright