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REAR ADMIRAL L. S. SABIN, U.S.N.

18 October 1954

Dear Tex:

Your boys Heath, Gens, Barnes and Wanamaker finally caught up with us in Haiphong where we now have them bedded down in ESTES. We have given them a formal briefing, I have talked to each of them and they have had free access to all the staff and our records. They have visited CTG 90.8 and the refugee camps, watched the loading of cargo and passengers and, before they leave, should have a fairly comprehensive picture of our job, including its pitfalls, problems, headaches and frustrations.

I had a long talk with both Heath and Wanamaker on the publicity angle. Frankly, my opinion is that it has been lousy and that both the Navy and the Amphibious Force have lost a golden opportunity the like of which will rarely come again, if ever. I don't know who muffed the ball. But I am inclined to place the onus somewhere between CinCPacFlt's PIO and CHINFO.

I pointed out to both Heath and Wanamaker that I had been on the verge of writing letters several times, especially to Slim Beecher, about this subject but refrained from doing so for the simple reason that I was placed in the awkward position of tooting my own horn, so to speak. Yet nothing could have been farther from the mind of any individual connected with this operation. What we all wanted was, first, for the people of our country to see what the United States Navy was capable of doing in an emergency and in an operation peculiar to its normal functions and, to say the least, curious in its concept had to be done. Secondly, we wanted to get the Amphibious Force some muchly needed public attention.

As far as higher authority is concerned, I felt that I went as far as I could in my initial effort to get publicity for the Navy and the Force. After that, somebody else had to carry the ball. I think a run down on this picture would be of interest to you, as you were not cut in on some of the original messages because of the initial highly classified nature of the project and because of certain restrictions I had to observe initially in my reports.

One of the last questions I asked Bill Callaghan before I hopped in an airplane on Sunday 8 August to come down here for conferences and an examination of the problem was "How about publicity?" Bill said "Sabe the only guidance I can give you is that for the present any publicity will have to come from Washington or CinCPacFleet."

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I told him I could understand that but it wouldn't help me when the first reporters I encountered got on my neck; which was exactly what happened. I had no sooner stepped from my airplane at Haiphong when two of them got me. I was able to fend them off by saying that it was impossible for me to answer questions about something I had just walked into to find out the answers myself. That satisfied them temporarily.

In Hanoi that evening I spent the night at the American Consul's. After dinner the phone rang. A U.S. correspondent on the other end began to fire questions at me. He said also "you realize don't you that this is an historical event - a story which has all sorts of possibilities in human interest!" I told him I did - and that as soon as I got the picture I'd answer any questions as frankly as I could.

The next day I sent a despatch to CinCPacFleet requesting guidance on publicity and suggesting that a public release be made from his headquarters.

The initial guidance I received, was that publicity was to be confined to a general statement to the effect that the U.S. government at the request of the French and Vietnamese governments would assist in the humanitarian evacuation of those Vietnamese in Northern Indo-China who did not want to remain under the yoke of Communism; that Admiral Stump was in overall charge; that General O'Daniel, under the Ambassador, would be the overall military coordinator and that I would command the sea lift using elements of the Amphibious Force Western Pacific.

At Saigon the following day, Ambassador Heath asked me what arrangements had been made for Navy publicity. I told him what my instructions were. He replied that that wasn't enough. He said the Navy had a wonderful opportunity for good and effective publicity which it shouldn't miss. He pointed to the Berlin Air Lift and what that had done for the Air Force. He said the Navy would be short sighted indeed if it didn't capitalize on this.

I asked him if I could quote him. He said "you certainly may and furthermore we'll set up a press conference for you tomorrow."

The press conference was held the next morning at General O'Daniel's headquarters and it was attended by about twenty newsmen; Americans, Fillipinos, Vietnamese and French.

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I went on the air to CinCPacFleet, quoted Ambassador Heath and strongly recommended complete and full coverage restricted only by the necessities of security. CinCPacFleet swung into action. He ordered his own assistant PIO to me, with journalists, photographers and equipment. It looked like things were on the rails.

In Manila, the day I joined the ESTES, I held another press conference. After it was over, Mr. Don Huth, Chief of the Manila Bureau of AP asked if he could go to Haiphong with me in the flagship. I took him. He filed daily despatches which were full of the Amphibious Force; how the OpOrder had been whipped up in two days, assembly of the ships, the huge logistics problem, human interest stories, etc.. He covered one of the early refugee loadings. Then he sent a code message to his boss in New York asking how his stories were clicking. He got a cryptic reply back, short and sweet. They were not clicking, no interest in the U.S.; go on back and get to work on the SEATO conference.

An attempt was made by CinCPacFleet to get newsmen in here by government transportation. That bogged down in Manila when their visas were delayed.

But in the meantime, the Navy PIO's were filing to CHINFO story after story with pictures. That is where my gripe comes. Here was a drama packed full of human interest of high significance and it was a Navy show. What has happened to those stories? Even the Service publications like A. N. Register and Journal have not played it. Except for a couple of short paragraphs buried on the inside, they haven't even mentioned it.

The Time-Life man told me recently in Saigon "This thing is a natural. Where was I when it started?" He filed a story. What happened to it, I don't know.

When we brought in the 100,000th refugee, the President of the Vietnam Government, the Ambassador to the United States, the accredited diplomatic corps of other nations and high ranking officers were all there. The Navy PIO's filed the stories. So far as we know they got nowhere

I feel that somewhere along the line the Navy has muffed an opportunity of a life time. Democracy has been sold out here to an extent no diplomats could ever sell it -- and it has been sold by the actions of a bunch of men and youngsters in a Navy uniform. They've done a job of good will for the U.S. Government that has been tremendous.



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As for the Amphibious Force angle, someone showed me an item that appeared in the U.S. press (about a half inch) which said units of the Seventh Fleet were doing this job! Heath told me you had read in U.S. News and World Report, that carriers, cruisers and destroyers were doing the job. These things don't sit well with our boys in PhibPac who have sweated this thing out.

The British sent a carrier over here, Warrior; she made two trips and lifted about 3000 refugees. That made every paper in England including the Staid old London Times and most of the papers in S. E. Asia.

Sorry this has been so lengthy, but I thought you ought to have a run down on it. CinCPacFleet gave us all the help he could in the way of PIO's and equipment. The boys filed their stories. The question is: What has happened to them? The Navy hasn't capitalized on its opportunity and, as for recognition of the Amphibs, that has been practically non-existent. Maybe Slim Beecher has the answer! I haven't.

Best regards,

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