

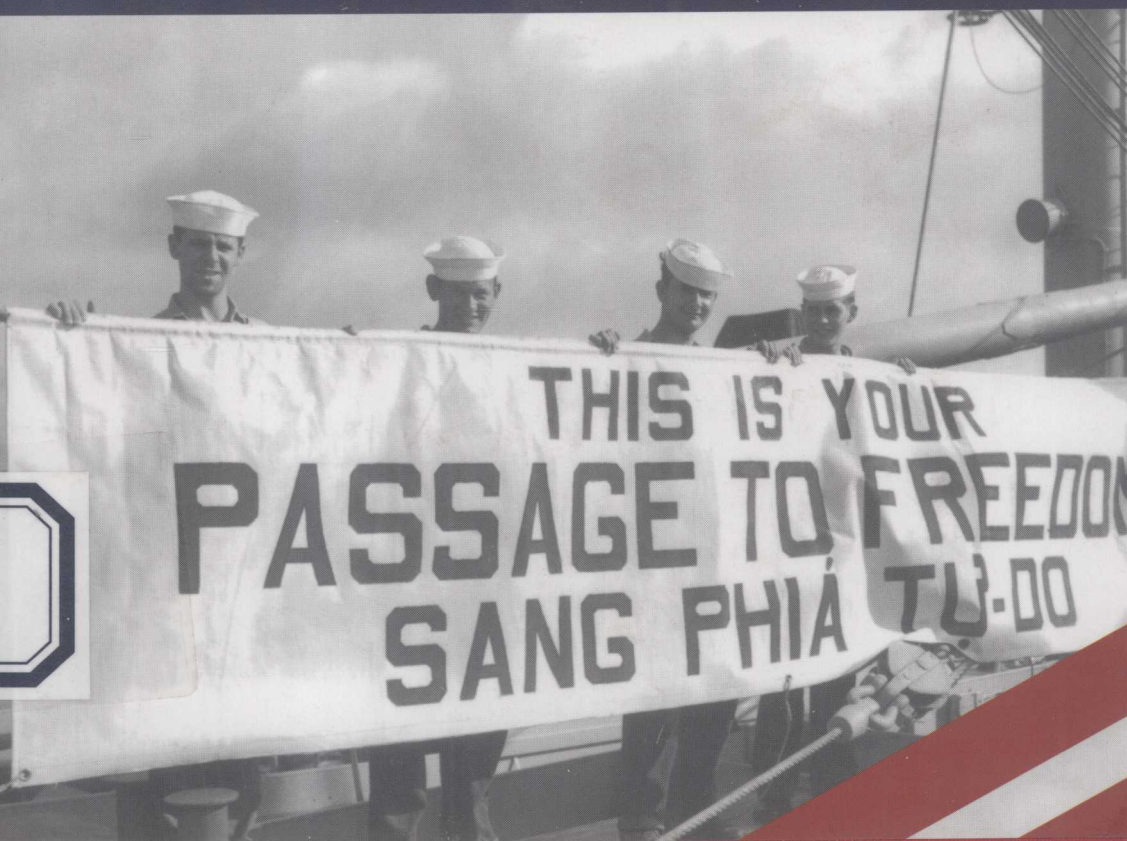


Operation Passage to Freedom

The United States Navy in Vietnam, 1954–1955



Ronald B. Frankum, Jr.



★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Operation Passage to Freedom

The United States Navy in Vietnam, 1954–1955

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Ronald B. Frankum, Jr.

Texas Tech University Press

Copyright 2007 by Texas Tech University Press

All rights reserved. No portion of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any means, including electronic storage and retrieval systems, except by explicit prior written permission of the publisher. Brief passages excerpted for review and critical purposes are excepted.

This book is typeset in Century Old Style Standard. The paper used in this book meets in the minimum requirements of ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992 (R1997). 

Designed by Kaelin Chappell Broadus

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Frankum, Ronald Bruce, 1967–

Operation Passage to Freedom : the United States Navy in
Vietnam, 1954–1955 / Ronald B. Frankum, Jr.

p. cm. — (Modern Southeast Asia series)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-89672-608-6 (hardcover : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 0-89672-608-8 (hardcover : alk. paper)

1. Operation Passage to Freedom, 1954–1955. 2. Evacuation of
civilians—Vietnam (Democratic Republic) 3. Humanitarian assistance,
American—Vietnam. 4. Political refugees—Vietnam. I. Title.

DS556.9.F69 2007

959.704'1086914—dc22 2006039810

Printed in the United States of America

07 08 09 10 11 12 13 14 15 / 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Texas Tech University Press

Box 41037

Lubbock, Texas 79409–1037 USA

800.832.4042

ttup@ttu.edu

www.ttup.ttu.edu

Modern Southeast Asia Series

James R. Reckner, *General Editor*



Operation Passage to Freedom



ILLUSTRATIONS



Fig. 2.1.	Refugee camp organization chart.	31
Fig. 2.2.	Staff organization chart for Staging Center Haiphong.	32
Fig. 4.1.	Vietnamese refugees aboard USS <i>Menard</i> .	69
Fig. 4.2.	A “helping hand” during Operation Passage to Freedom.	70
Fig. 4.3.	The first debarkation of Vietnamese refugees in Saigon.	72
Fig. 4.4.	Vietnamese Catholic priests overseeing the preparation of rice.	73
Fig. 4.5.	Vietnamese refugees being served food, August 1954.	74
Fig. 4.6.	Instant friends.	76
Fig. 4.7.	Refugee groups at Phom Xa railway station, Haiphong.	78
Fig. 4.8.	A ladder is lowered to a French LSM, August 1954.	80
Fig. 4.9.	Reception committee passing out welcome packages.	81
Fig. 4.10.	Delousing of Vietnamese refugees before boarding.	84
Fig. 5.1.	View of the debarkation point in Saigon.	100
Fig. 5.2.	Refugee camp in South Vietnam.	103
Fig. 6.1.	PMU team dust soldiers with DDT before they board.	118
Fig. 6.2.	Ceremony aboard USS <i>Menard</i> .	123
Fig. 6.3.	American sailor helps feed a small refugee.	131
Fig. 6.4.	Welcoming speech at the arrival of the one hundred thousandth refugee.	132
Fig. 6.5.	Vietnamese Catholic priests served as leaders and interpreters.	136
Fig. 8.1.	Winner of the beard contest among the sailors.	173
Fig. 8.2.	A small boy lends a helping hand.	174

MAPS



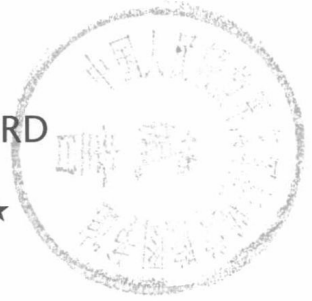
Map 1.1.	Indochina in 1954, showing the Demarcation Line between the North and the South	13
Map 3.1.	Haiphong and Its Harbor	45
Map 3.2.	Underwater Demolition Team Survey of Do Son Peninsula	47

TABLES



Table 2.1. Estimated Costs for Refugee Resettlement in the Saigon Area (in Piasters)	29
Table 3.1. Task Force 90 Organization Structure	42
Table 5.1. Estimated Space Available for Evacuees in South Vietnam	98
Table 6.1. Number of Days Each Ship Type Served in the Operation	139
Table 7.1. Refugee Status in Central Vietnam	150
Table 8.1. Central Vietnam Refugee Census	171
Table 9.1. North Vietnamese Refugees Evacuated to South Vietnam as of November 26, 1954, and Repartition of Refugees in Resettlement Areas	187
Table 9.2. Task Group 90.8, January 1955	195
Table 10.1 Evacuation Totals, May 1955	205

SERIES EDITOR'S FOREWORD



Few events in American history have generated as much emotion, as much division, and as many long-term impacts for American society as our nation's involvement in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia in the latter half of the twentieth century. Texas Tech University Press' Modern Southeast Asia Series is intended to facilitate an open dialogue about the Vietnam War and its lessons, with contributions reflecting all points of view.

In this work, Ronald B. Frankum, Jr., recounts events surrounding America's first major, direct involvement with the Vietnamese people. For those who went south in 1954 and 1955, it is easy to conclude they sought the simple things in life: an opportunity to work the land, to raise a family in peace, and to worship as they saw fit. Unfortunately for those who made the long trip south, and for those native to the South, such simple aspirations proved remarkably difficult to achieve.

In the summer of 2004, while I was leading a student study trip through Vietnam, we had the occasion to drive the highway from Rach Gia on the Gulf of Thailand to Long Xuyen on the Mekong's lower branch, the Hau (Bassac) River. I hadn't traveled this highway since 1969, when I was a part of an armed convoy of Vietnamese military vehicles heading south to the coastal city, so I observed the passing scene with great interest. A few miles north of Rach Gia we passed through the village of Cai Son. As we drove through, I was pleasantly surprised to see rising in the center of the town a magnificent new Roman Catholic church. Indeed, the structure was imposing, cathedral-like, and it drew on architectural lines that would be quite familiar to American Catholics. Cai Son, it turned out, was one of the areas in which the Ngo Dinh Diem resettled Catholics from the North. In this work, Dr. Frankum carefully examines the events of 1954 and 1955 that resulted in the establishment of a vibrant Catholic

community at Cai Son and similar communities in a number of other locales throughout the Republic of Vietnam.

The essence of the situation in 1954 was that, having sustained a major defeat at the strategic Dien Bien Phu on the border between Laos and North Vietnam, the French at Geneva agreed to a series of provisions designed to end the First Indochina War. A “temporary military demarcation” line was established at the seventeenth parallel, with a communist government established in the North and a noncommunist government in the South. The Geneva Accords included a provision that individuals in either of the two zones were permitted to freely relocate from one zone to the other during a three-hundred-day period of “regroupment.”

Following Geneva, the noncommunist government headed by Ngo Dinh Diem struggled to establish the basic services of a national government for the people of the South, even as the process of regroupment progressed. One can but imagine the challenge of establishing the necessary infrastructure of a national government in the most tranquil of times. But 1954 was not a tranquil time. Of greatest significance for South Vietnam was the flow of approximately eight hundred thousand Vietnamese from the North to the South during the regroupment period. For the Ngo Dinh Diem government and the U.S. Overseas Mission, the arrival of this massive influx of humanity posed significant problems.

The majority of these individuals traveled south by land; however, more than three hundred thousand of them became the temporary guests of the U.S. Navy. Tired, fearing religious persecution, their traditional close ties to the land severed, and subjected to communist propaganda that suggested the American sailors would throw them overboard once the ships went to sea, the refugees nevertheless cast their lot with the American sailors.

In order to capture the largely unrecorded story of the seaborne exodus of North Vietnamese, Frankum conducted extensive interviews with crewmembers of U.S. Navy and Military Sea Transportation Service ships that participated in Operation Passage to Freedom. As Frankum notes, this was the largest such humanitarian sealift in the history of the United States.

But there is much more to this story than just an account of sailors adapting to unique challenges in order to carry out an unusual mission. In fact, the history of our navy is replete with major humanitarian re-

sponses to evolving civil crises. Perhaps the most notable recent large-scale humanitarian mission was the navy's response to the remarkable tsunami that devastated regions of South and Southeast Asia in 2004, but in Indochina in 1954 and 1955, the ships of Amphibious Group One responded in truly professional form to the crisis they confronted.

In one of those unconscious aspects of history, the same Amphibious Group One, whose efforts helped so many reach freedom in the South in 1954 and 1955 and helped provide an enlarged political base for Ngo Dinh Diem, a Catholic, stood offshore from Saigon at the end of October 1963 in anticipation of the coup d'état that resulted in the assassination of President Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu.

The story of Operation Passage to Freedom, though, as Frankum explains, also involved the even more complex issues of reception and resettlement of the refugees throughout South Vietnam. Frankum's account of the U.S. Overseas Mission's tireless efforts to deal with all of the unanticipated crises related to the relocation of some eight hundred thousand displaced Vietnamese is a story long in need of recognition, and it is one that illuminates America's early involvement in the shaping of the Republic of Vietnam.

James R. Reckner
Texas Tech University

PREFACE



Often I have been asked, as a historian, how I became interested in researching the Vietnam War. The response, perhaps, is not appropriate for these pages; it certainly would take more time and space to convey than what I have available here. What is important, however, is that through my study of the Vietnam War and its origins I have identified several significant events that have not drawn the attention of scholars before. One of those events was the August 1954–May 1955 U.S. naval action Operation Passage to Freedom. The story behind my interest in Operation Passage to Freedom is applicable in this case. Very little has been written about the U.S. Navy in Vietnam in the immediate post–Korean War era, nor has the magnitude of American participation in the resettlement of Vietnam refugees as a result of the 1954 Geneva Conference been explored. I had not realized the extent of American involvement in that critical time in Vietnamese history until I happened to chance upon a photograph depicting a scene from the operation.

Early in 1998, I was sitting at my desk in the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University sorting through photographs in the collection of Douglas Pike, a longtime Foreign Service officer who spent several years in Vietnam and a lifetime collecting materials and data on Southeast Asia. A series of photographs among the several thousand in the collection drew my interest, including a black-and-white image of an older Vietnamese woman, in pitiable condition, surrounded by U.S. sailors. The caption on the back indicated that the photograph was one taken during the U.S. naval operation known as Passage to Freedom. I quickly sorted the image with others from the collection, but it continued to play in my mind for the next year or two. Prompted by the expression on the face of the woman, which combined what could only be described as a lifetime of hardship, a recent experience of anguish, and a glimmer of hope, I began

researching the operation. What I learned was rather shocking, as few of the more significant works on the Vietnam War gave more than a passing mention of Operation Passage to Freedom.

It was in early 2000 that I resolved to use this operation as a foundation for my next research project. On a Friday, late in the afternoon, after searching the Internet, I found websites and contact information for the veterans' associations of a few American ships that had been involved in the operation, and I sent out a general inquiry to see if I could find anyone who had participated in the event. The response I received when I returned to work on Monday morning served as a catalyst for this book.

Operation Passage to Freedom was more than a brief paragraph in the American war in Vietnam. For most Americans, Operation Passage to Freedom, if thought of at all, was a footnote to the early involvement of the United States in the war that would consume the nation a decade later. But to the young men, now in their seventies and eighties, who moved a nation in 1954 and 1955, Operation Passage to Freedom was a pivotal point in their lives. Even fifty years later, for many of the sailors who served aboard those ships of Task Force 90, the event became a defining one in their lives.

What those sailors accomplished during the three hundred days of Operation Passage to Freedom changed, forever, the lives of more than 310,000 Vietnamese who traveled on American ships. What the United States attempted to accomplish during that period significantly altered the lives of more than 810,000 Vietnamese who chose to move from the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) in the north to the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) in the south. Operation Passage to Freedom established the United States' moral obligation to the Vietnamese people through its participation in the event. By assisting the Vietnamese move from North Vietnam to the south across the seventeenth parallel, which divided communism and noncommunism, the United States committed itself to betterment of those people's lives. Involvement in the moving of a significant part of a nation established the moral obligation to ensure that those people's lives would improve under a democratic government, free from the threat of communism. It was this moral obligation that motivated American officials on the ground during the operation and propelled the United States during the Eisenhower administration to help build a nation. It was the failure to uphold this moral obligation during the Kennedy

administration that fed into American escalation of the war in the 1960s. This argument, however, is for another book.

In many respects, Operation Passage to Freedom provides another piece to the puzzle in explaining why and how the initial humanitarian involvement of the United States in Vietnam in the 1950s eventually led to its massive military involvement in the 1960s and 1970s. The humanitarian nature of Operation Passage to Freedom—that is, the assistance to those in need of help—brought the generation of American personnel involved in the naval operation, as well as those involved in the resettlement and rehabilitation of the refugees, a new and different perspective on the role of the United States in the post-World War II Cold War environment. The need and desire to help forged a bond with the Vietnamese. This bond translated to a moral obligation by those who experienced the American operation to see that the refugees received the best care the United States could provide as well as an environment in which they had the possibility of thriving. This moral obligation does not replace or supplant America's primary foreign policy objective of containing communism in Southeast Asia, nor does it take the place of other factors such as the economic cohesion of the region or the establishment of the experiment of democracy in Vietnam to serve as a bulwark against communist encroachment. Operation Passage to Freedom helped to encourage the moral obligation that sought to strengthen the nation of South Vietnam, to better its people, and to satisfy American foreign policy objectives in the region.

This book is organized chronologically whenever possible. The most notable exceptions are during the months of August and September 1954, when the United States was most active on the ground and at sea. I chose to separate the events by land and sea during those two months in order to allow the reader to fully appreciate the magnitude of the operation and the work of the United States Overseas Mission (USOM), which, like the navy's operation, has been relegated to the back pages and footnotes of America's experience in Vietnam during the refugee crisis. Operation Passage to Freedom was one of the largest humanitarian sealifts of its kind in the history of the United States, but the work of the USOM in refugee relief and organizing the infrastructure of a country torn apart by nine years of war and one hundred years of French colonial rule is equally impressive. Historians of this period tend to focus on the rise

of Ngo Dinh Diem and his battles with the Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, and Binh Xuyen or the intrigue of Edward Landsdale and the Central Intelligence Agency. Lost is the work of the USOM, which I hope will find its rightful place in history through these pages. Consideration of Operation Passage to Freedom and the work of the USOM as part of America's early experience in Vietnam help to explain why Eisenhower's nation-building experiment was undertaken outside the context of Cold War mentality. I do not dispute the significance of the Cold War in the shaping of American diplomacy in Vietnam; it is paramount to understanding U.S. action and the evolution of the war. I argue that Cold War mentality, coupled with the experience of Passage to Freedom and the emergence of a moral obligation to the Vietnamese people, help to broaden, and perhaps make even more complicated, America's longest war.

Special thanks for this work go to Sherri Lynn Brouillette, my wife, who read through earlier versions of this manuscript and, in addition to editing my faulty prose, asked the questions necessary to make the final version of the book understandable. It takes a unique individual to do this; I am lucky enough to have married one. James R. Reckner, director of the Vietnam Center and Archive at Texas Tech University, also deserves a note of thanks for his encouragement in the project and continued support. The Vietnam Archive continues to be one of the real treasures for historians of the Vietnam War, and under the direction of Reckner and Steve Maxner, my successor at the Vietnam Archive, it promises to achieve more than its most vocal supporters could have imagined. The Naval Historical Center provided a wealth of information on Rear Admiral Lorenzo S. Sabin and the operation as well as financial assistance through the Vice Admiral Edwin B. Hooper Research Grant in 2001. Also, I wish to thank William S. Dudley and Edward J. Marolda of the Naval Historical Center for their kind words and support.

A few veteran sailors deserve a special note of thanks as well. Ted Bobinski (USS *Consolation*), John L. Cole (USS *Calvert*), William A. Greene (USS *Gunston Hall*), Noah Joyner (USS *Estes*), Jack Lemasters (LST-887), Ralph Limon (USS *Telfair*), Russ Macdonald (USS *Montrose*), Fred C. Machado (USS *Montague*), Les and Dorothy Rutherford (USS *Menard*), and Jim Ruotsala (USS *Montrose*) all helped to coordinate the members of their associations for oral history interviews and allowed me access to their association reunions. Robert Mix, who served with

Admiral Sabin, also a willing participant, provided a link to a man I never had the chance to meet and offered encouragement and cajoling, when necessary, to help me get this book finished. Without their help, this book would not be nearly as complete. The names of all the sailors who contributed to the project, through either interviews or personal donations of material, are listed in the bibliography.

This book started as an exploration of the stories of those sailors who served aboard the ships of Task Force 90. It evolved into something much more. To the more than forty sailors I interviewed and the many hundreds who served on the ships of Task Force 90: I hope you will find the story of your humanitarianism inspiring. You should know that I tried to include as many of your thoughts as reasonable. To other readers of this book: the oral history interviews, copies or originals of photographs, slides, letters, and documents reside in the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University. This historical event demands preservation, and the Vietnam Archive is the only place I consider safe enough to entrust with the memories and materials of the sailors who made this history.