



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 1163036

*Vietnamese refugees board an Air Force C-141 Starlifter at NAS Cubi Point, Philippines, passenger terminal. These evacuees were on their way to Guam and Operation New Life.*

military personnel or vessels would be allowed to enter the country. Thus no Vietnamese vessel, naval or otherwise, would be allowed to enter Subic Bay, leaving the Vietnamese with only two choices, abandon ship or sail their vessels to Guam. The edict also meant that all other transiting refugees would have to minimize their stay in the Philippines, and in order to accomplish that, the processing procedure at "way stations" like Clark and Subic would have to be expedited.<sup>5</sup>

#### *Way Stations*

To help meet the demands of the Philippines Government by assisting in the task of streamlining refugee operations in the Philippines, the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines, after standing down as the Amphibious Evacuation RVN Support Group, reformed as a battalion and reentered the evacuation process. Eventually its mission would be to assist in the establishment of a refugee base camp—a way station to aid transiting refugees.

At approximately the same time Lieutenant Colonel Charles E. Hester's battalion began preparing to reenter evacuee operations, Ambassador Parker Borg notified the State Department, Ambassador Martin

in Saigon, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Admiral Gayler, CinCPac, of the Philippines Government's displeasure with the refugee situation. Borg had become aware of the seriousness of the problem when he received a note from the Philippines Department of Foreign Affairs setting forth new guidelines for the Vietnamese refugees. It said: "No more than 200 evacuees shall be at the base at any one time. The evacuees shall depart from the base for a mother country within three days. The evacuees shall not go outside the base, and the length of time of this evacuation through the base shall be determined by the Philippines Government, taking into account the prevailing circumstances." The Ambassador agreed with Marcos' position, believing that the initial airlift had been organized poorly. He contended that "had evacuees been more carefully screened for eligibility and staged more quickly through the Philippines, the GOP [Government of the Philippines] action might have been avoided. However, see no choice now but to comply with GOP instruction." Ambassador Borg's first recommended course of action to resolve this potential threat to the harmony of Philippine-American relations entailed removing, as quickly as possible, the backlog of refu-



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 1163039

*Refugees are loaded into a C-141 Starlifter at NAS Cubi Point for the trip to Guam. The Philippines Government had given the U.S. only 72 hours to process these refugees.*

*Members of the AESF provide assistance as crewmen and dependents disembark from a Vietnamese Navy minesweeper at Subic Bay. Processing took place in the warehouse to the left and later the refugees were placed on board the USNS Sergeant Truman Kimbro.*

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 1163133





Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 1163064

*Grande Island sits just west of Cubi Point and was identified as an ideal location for a refugee camp. The island was the first way station for Vietnamese seeking a new life.*

gees from Clark Air Base. He stipulated, "No more third country evacuees permitted to stage through U.S. bases in the Philippines until backlog cleared. Backlog of evacuees at Clark must be removed immediately."<sup>6</sup>

Fortunately, this diplomatic impasse occurred prior to 29 April and before Operation Frequent Wind and the mass exodus from South Vietnam. By that date, Air Force transport aircraft had moved the entire backlog from Clark to Guam where Marines from Marine Barracks, Guam (manning the Operation New Life receiving centers), welcomed them. Removal of the backlog addressed only the immediate problem and not the one troubling Ambassador Borg: how to minimize the stay of evacuees on Philippines soil so as not to exceed the 72-hour restriction. Since the majority of the next wave of refugees would arrive by ship, Borg decided to shift his focus from Clark to Subic Bay.

The ships carrying the evacuees to Guam would have to dock in Subic Bay for replenishment, and therefore it seemed logical to relocate the refugee center there. Ambassador Borg believed that this action would also reduce the delay involved in processing the evacuees. Considering the constraints set forth by the Philippines Government with regard to security and length of stay, the site for the center had to be near the water, highly secure, and limited in access. Nothing fit that description better than land surrounded by water, an island in Subic Bay. Two miles off the approach end of Runway 7 at Naval Air Sta-

tion Cubi Point sits Grande Island. Normally used for recreational activities, it suddenly became the refugee housing and processing center. Temporary and functional by design, this initial check-in point would serve as a way station enroute to Guam, but first it had to be constructed, then stocked with stores and manned by personnel, and finally secured by forces. Starting from ground zero, all of this had to be accomplished

*South Vietnamese Air Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky strolls the deck of the USS Midway. He flew his personal helicopter to the ship shortly after noon on 29 April.*

Marine Corps Historical Collection





Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A801612

*Marines keep order among Vietnamese pilots on board the attack aircraft carrier USS Hancock (CVA 19). Many brought their entire crews as they fled from Saigon area bases.*

*VNAF helicopters approach the Midway from all directions. They are observing no specific traffic pattern and are creating a hazard to both the ship and other aircraft in flight.*

Photo courtesy of BGen William A. Bloomer, USMC (Ret)



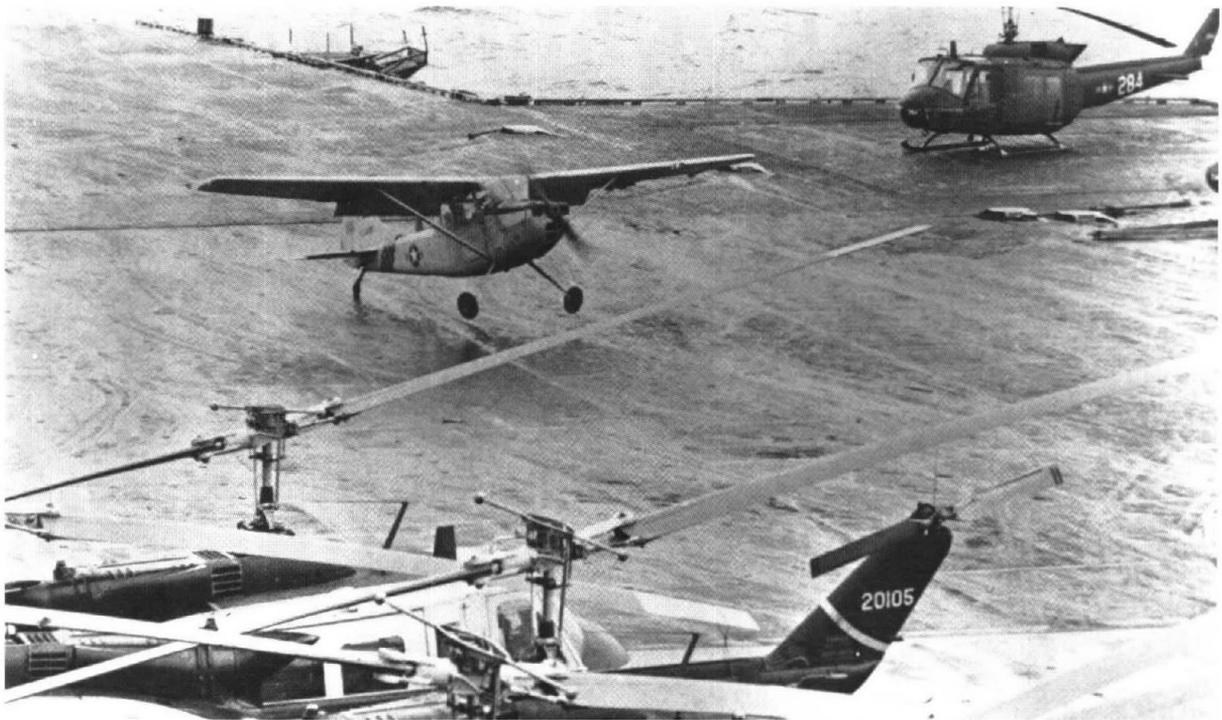


Photo courtesy of BGen William A. Bloomer, USMC (Ret)

*A Cessna O-1 Bird Dog lands on the USS Midway without benefit of a tailhook or barricade. The pilot, a Vietnamese major, brought with him his wife and five children.*

in less than 48 hours. Already, thousands of refugees were on board ships headed for Subic at near flank speed.

Although the numbers of evacuees on these ships far exceeded initial estimates, the total did not surprise the Navy and Marine Corps. They had anticipated the worst. On 22 April, Admiral Maurice F. Weisner, the commander of the Pacific Fleet, sent a message to Admiral Gayler requesting guidance on how to handle what he expected to be an onslaught of refugees attempting to board Navy ships from every type of craft imaginable. Additionally, he addressed the aspect of safe havens. He said: "Consider it likely that a substantial number of Vietnamese may attempt to flee the coast of South Vietnam in small craft and assorted boats . . . a number of them will approach USN and MSC ships and request refuge . . . . These personnel must also be considered in planning for safe haven, designation of which remains an urgent requirement. Request policy guidance in this matter."<sup>7</sup>

The Navy's Pacific headquarters then queried JCS as to what they should tell Admiral Weisner. Unfortunately, the response came in the form of a message on 27 April, and was of little help. It did not even mention the possibility of Vietnamese heliborne refu-

gees. It only said, "Suggest such persons be delivered to Phu Quoc."<sup>8</sup>

The designation of Grande Island as the first stop to safe haven and the simultaneous establishment of Guam as another "way station" and a refugee receiving center went a long way toward addressing Admiral Weisner's concerns. The answer to his question of who should be granted permission to board American ships never came and eventually events made a response unnecessary. On 29 April, when the first Vietnamese helicopters (Air Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky flew his helicopter to *Midway* shortly after noon on 29 April) began landing on any floating platform they could find, authorized access became a mute issue. Unknowingly and certainly unintentionally, these Vietnamese helicopter refugees helped the Americans. They alerted and thereby prepared the crews for the imminent crisis that Admiral Weisner had anticipated, literally thousands of small craft overflowing with frantic Vietnamese seeking refuge. They tried to board the ships in any manner possible, but received an unexpected reception. Before any ship would permit entry, each refugee had to submit to a screening. Marines checked each one for weapons and once cleared, then permitted them to board. In this way, the Americans attempted to insure safe passage for all.

The helicopter problem reached crisis proportions when Vietnamese pilots started to cut in front of Marine helicopters on final approach to their respective ships while other Vietnamese pilots tried to land on barges filled with refugees. Although the numbers these helicopters carried were incidental, the hazards and difficulties they created were totally unanticipated and nearly impossible to handle. More than 30 empty Hueys went to intentional ocean graves at the hands of Navy crewmen attempting to keep the flight decks of their ships clear.

Although many unexpected events such as this occurred, it can be argued that the large number of evacuees was anticipated and predicted by Ambassador Graham Martin. On 23 April, in a message to the Secretary of State and Admiral Gayler, he estimated that the total number of evacuees for the entire operation could be as high as 200,000. Likewise, Rear Admiral Hugh G. Benton expected some problems as a result of the size of the potential evacuee population. Placed (on 5 April) in overall charge of the ongoing evacuation from South Vietnam as CinCPac's representative in Saigon, Admiral Benton predicted some problems with shipboard evacuation in the final days. He alerted Admiral Gayler in Hawaii by wiring on 23 April: "It is proposed that operational control of MSC shipping be passed to Commander Seventh Fleet early enough to permit an orderly turnover and provide continuity of operations. It is recommended that additional MSC personnel be assigned to Commander Seventh Fleet when MSC ships are chopped." (Chopped means the transfer of tactical control from one commander to another.)<sup>9</sup> According to the Seventh Fleet commander, this transfer of control never took place. Admiral Steele stated, "Operational control of Military Sealift Command was never passed to Commander Seventh Fleet as recommended by Rear Admiral Benton. In my opinion, this was a serious error. It was another instance of violation of the cardinal military principle, unity of command."<sup>10</sup>

The release of the message authorizing the refugee receiving center on Guam, the reorganization of the Amphibious Evacuation Security Force into 14 MSC shipboard detachments, and the use of 1st Battalion, 4th Marines to construct and outfit the Grande Island refugee camp indicated that the events of 29 April were not unanticipated, possibly just underestimated, especially in terms of magnitude and speed of occurrence. The fact that these actions happened immediately after the release of the Weisner and Benton

messages signalled a gathering consensus that additional preparations had to be made. The Philippines Government's diplomatic note provided the stimulus. These decisions, made none too soon, would have a far-reaching impact on the Marine Corps.

Marines would be affected in four different areas. It would touch first and foremost the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines. Additionally, the AESF would feel the impact as the group most directly involved in the handling of refugees. The third area affected would be Guam and its Marines, and the 3d Marines on Hawaii. Additionally, a contingent of Marines drawn from Camp Pendleton and Marine Corps Air Station El Toro would also become involved in the process. The links in the chain to freedom were forming and the Marine Corps would continue to play a major role in forging it.

*Preparations: 1st Battalion, 4th Marines  
and the Task Force*

When Admiral Donald B. Whitmire's Task Force 76, Major Quinlan, and the AESF sailed out of Subic Bay on 18 April leaving the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines behind, Lieutenant Colonel Hester felt certain his battalion had completed its contribution to the evacuation effort. Little did he know that before the month ended, he and his Marines would be key players in relieving what stood as a potential diplomatic roadblock to continued refugee operations. Lieutenant Colonel Hester reported: "1st Battalion, 4th Marines played a large role in the orderly processing of thousands of refugees through Grande Island, by providing manpower for movement of equipment, setting up of over 140 refugee tents and assisting in the overall control of the evacuees."<sup>11</sup> Just as importantly, the Marines assisted in the unloading of barges and shipping and provided security for all of these activities. Petty Officer First Class Paul Long recalled that, ". . . before the evacuees arrived, the Marines and Seabees worked around the clock, erecting hundreds of tents, building a chain-link fence, installing security lights and setting up nearly 200 toilets on the island."<sup>12</sup> The Headquarters and Service Company commander, Captain James P. Rigoulot, stated, "We averaged about 300 Marines a day working, pitching 140 tents, and setting up."<sup>13</sup>

As the numbers of South Vietnamese attempting to flee the country multiplied, other means of transport exceeded the use of the helicopter. Approximately 30,000 escaped on a Vietnamese Navy flotilla of gunboats, patrol boats, and other small craft.<sup>14</sup> The first refugees to reach Grande Island arrived well before the

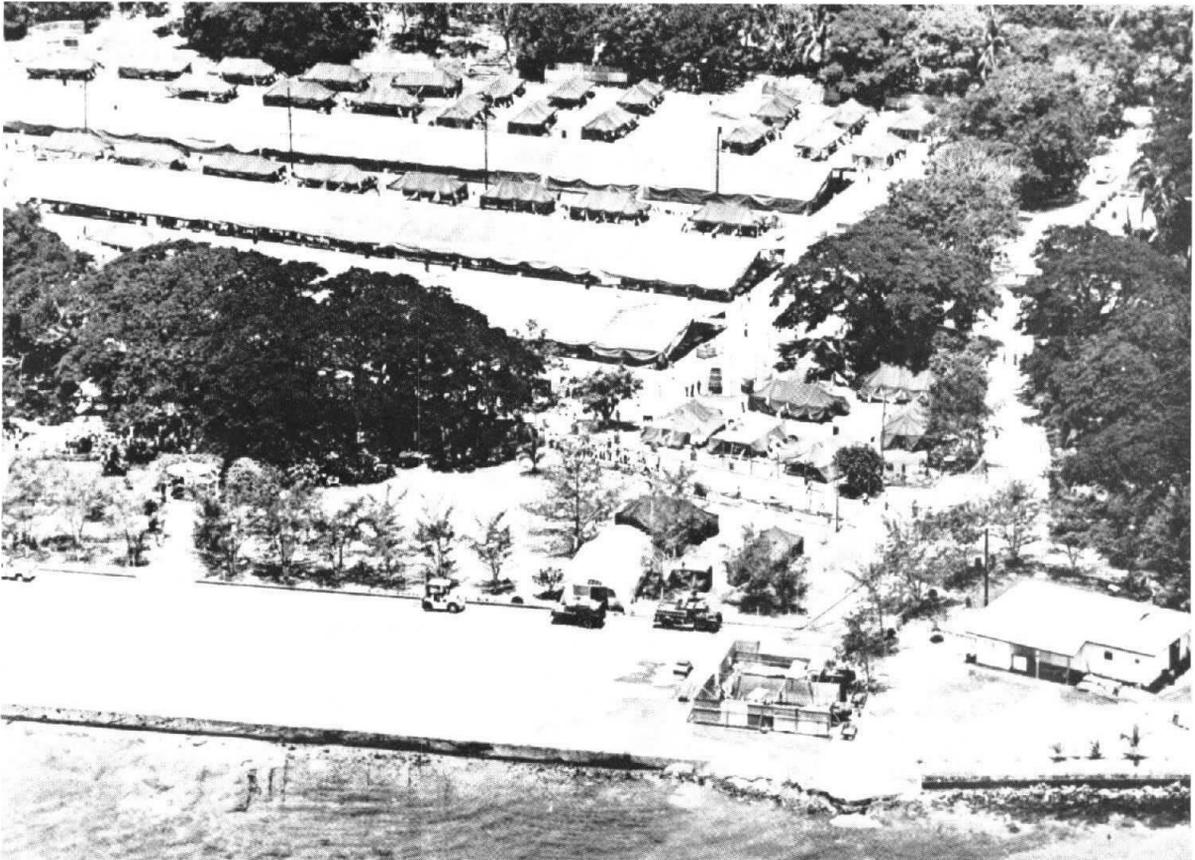


Photo courtesy of Capt James D. Tregurtha, USN (Ret)

*Tents to house refugees are erected on the softball field and golf course of Grande Island. The camp commander was Subic Bay executive officer Capt W. B. Moore, Jr., USN.*

Vietnamese Navy's evacuees even left South Vietnam. These early visitors "called it 'Project New Life,' and during the height of the massive airlift, nearly 5,000 evacuees arrived on Grande Island at the mouth of Subic Bay . . . Fifteen minutes after a tent was up it was occupied."<sup>15</sup> Until 28 April the South Vietnamese came by C-141 and C-130, but on that day Admiral Gayler in a message to the Air Force suspended all but C-130 flights which themselves were ended the following day when a Hercules incurred damage from artillery fire directed at Tan Son Nhut Airport. The admiral also addressed how he expected the refugees to get to their next destination: "MAC [Military Airlift Command] will arrange onward movement to Guam/Wake and other designated locations."<sup>16</sup> This would change significantly within the next 24 hours. The suspension of the fixed-wing airlift would mean the start of Frequent Wind and the helicopter evacuation of South Vietnam, followed by the RVN Navy's evacuees.

As soon as Tan Son Nhut Airport came under siege,

first from a bombing attack by Communist-flown A-37s late on the afternoon of 28 April and then from a rocket barrage 10 hours later, South Vietnamese Air Force pilots started manning their planes and helicopters and flying them, along with their dependents, to U.S. Navy ships off the coast or to bases in Thailand. The *Blue Ridge* reported the landing of one of these craft, a VNAF CH-47, on its deck shortly after the aerial bombardment of Tan Son Nhut. It quoted the pilot and copilot, each of whom had brought along his wife and children, "Our crew was refueling at Tan Son Nhut when six A-37s commenced attack . . . The only way out for South Vietnamese helo pilots was to head to sea and U.S. shipping." In the process of landing, the Vietnamese Chinook cut off the approach of an Air America helo attempting to land on the *Blue Ridge*.<sup>17</sup> This type of incident would become commonplace in the next 48 hours. These refugees, arriving by Vietnamese helicopter, and subsequent groups, arriving by small craft or carried by Marine helicopters, represented the gravest challenge to the evacuation



Photo courtesy of Capt James D. Tregurtha, USN (Ret)

*A flotilla of Vietnamese Navy ships sits at anchor in Subic Bay. There was no more room on Grande Island for these refugees so they had to be loaded directly to MSC ships.*

security force and the Navy. All of them had to be moved and as quickly as possible to ships prepared to house them. Once on board, they would then be transported as soon as possible to Grande Island for processing.

The Military Sealift Command's ships had been outfitted, manned, and equipped to handle large numbers of evacuees. Where to transfer them and how quickly became the key questions. Congress had just announced that day, 28 April, the refugees' final destination. House Democratic Whip John J. McFall stated that refugees located in four different areas of Asia would be brought to Camp Pendleton, California; Eglin Air Force Base, Florida; and Fort Chaffee, Arkansas. Also that day, Admiral Gayler notified the JCS and Seventh Fleet that it was time to begin the refugee air evacuation to Guam and the United States and that within 24-36 hours he expected a rate of 3,000 per day. With a destination finally in hand, the only thing that stood between the refugees and freedom was the Pacific Ocean. With the means available to

navigate at least to the island of Guam, the next step for the refugees would be to find a way from the gray Navy ships to the blue MSC ships.<sup>18</sup>

Admiral Whitmire, the task force commander, had ordered that all of the amphibious ships with well decks (decks that can be opened to the sea and filled with water) be placed in a line landward of the helicopter platforms.\* This meant the LSDs and LPDs would move their evacuees down to the well decks where they would board LCMs (Mike Boats) for a ride to one of the four MSC ships anchored eastward, seaward of the amphibs. Once a sealift ship was full, it would weigh anchor and make room for an empty one. In order to facilitate the transfer of refugees, the tank landing ships (LSTs) would float their causeway sections. With

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\*Captain James D. Tregurtha, USN, commander of Task Group 76.5, Surface Evacuation Forces, remembered: "We had to move the holding area farther out from the coast because of the possibility of attack by North Vietnamese PT boats and also to discourage the exodus of fishing boats and other craft to the Navy ships." Tregurtha Comments.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A801617  
*South Vietnamese pilot and his family walk with Marine across the USS Hancock's flight deck. Entire families escaped by air and many flew to Thailand.*

these sections lashed to the belly of the ship next to the accommodation ladder, the Mike boats then would have a relatively safe place to dock and unload. This distribution of refugees to their temporary sea quarters ensured a minimum amount of passenger traffic on the decks of the helicopter platforms and achieved its primary goal of getting the Vietnamese to the available food, water, and medical supplies. This evolution was so important that a special situation report announced its start. Special Frequent Wind Execution Situation Report 018 issued at 1700 on 29 April stated, "Transfer of evacuees from USN to MSC shipping has commenced and proceeding smoothly."<sup>19</sup> Vice Admiral Steele, on board the *Oklahoma City* (CLG 5), having received this message from the *Blue Ridge* (Rear Admiral Whitmire's command ship), knew that things were proceeding as planned. To the casual observer, this did not seem to be the case because as far as the naked eye could see there was nothing but boats coming from the coastline, headed directly for the fleet. Each of these small Vietnamese vessels carried more passengers than it could safely hold and this represented only the first wave of those fleeing their homeland.

*This picture of a Vietnamese pilot ditching his helicopter is testimony to the desperation that prevailed. As a result of the unexpected arrival of dozens of South Vietnamese helicopters on 29 April, many of the helicopter-capable ships had decks covered with aircraft.*

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 711643



As a result of this incredibly large armada of small craft, the efficient movement of refugees between ships became even more critical and meant the difference between control and chaos and even life and death. Indications of the onset of confusion were everywhere, but no where more so than in the skies overhead. On the *Dubuque* alone, five Vietnamese helicopters had made unauthorized landings.

To prevent the Vietnamese pilots' flagrant disregard of basic flight safety from endangering his ship and its crew and thereby impeding the evacuation process, Navy Captain Roy W. McLain, Jr., the *Dubuque's* captain, established fire-fighting teams augmented by Marines from the AESF's detachments Quebec, Romeo, and Uniform. This mini-crash crew stood by ready to assist should one of these many, wildly gyrating helicopters crash on the *Dubuque*. The important contributions of these AESF Marines would be matched by their peers in detachments who now found themselves fully committed to assisting and controlling the arriving refugees.

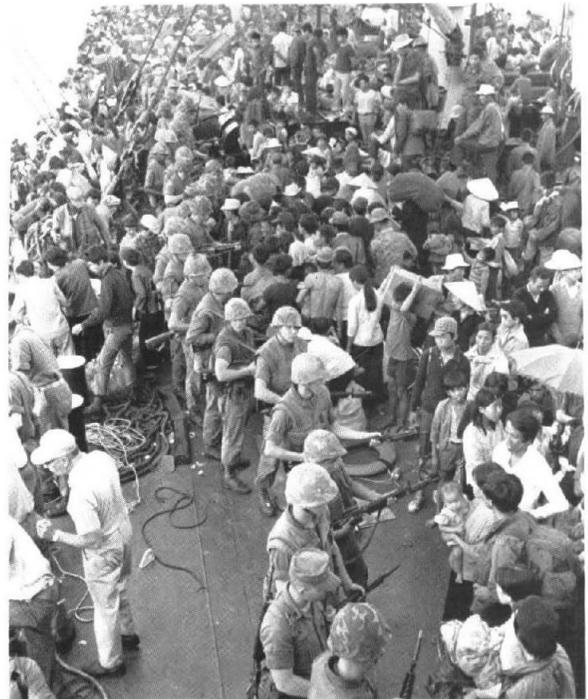
*Evacuation and Passage:*

*Frequent Wind and the AESF's Final Chapter*

For First Lieutenant Joseph J. Rogish, Operation Frequent Wind began 29 April with a wake-up call and ended approximately 24 hours later with a night helicopter landing on the *Hancock*. After four frustrating days of arising at 0130 and waiting hours to learn of another postponement, the word to begin Operation Frequent Wind came as a most rewarding and welcome surprise. Yet even this event occurred in a convoluted manner, with first a cancellation then an immediate recall.

The unusual events surrounding this operation actually began two weeks earlier when Lieutenant Rogish's ship, the *Hancock*, left the formation as the task force prepared to depart Vietnamese coastal waters. The *Hancock*, with a different destination, quickly put many miles between it and the Subic-bound task force. The next day, the *Hancock* and its complement were enjoying a port call in Singapore.\* Then just as quickly as liberty had begun, it was over. Admiral Steele had ordered the ship and its pilots back to the South China Sea.

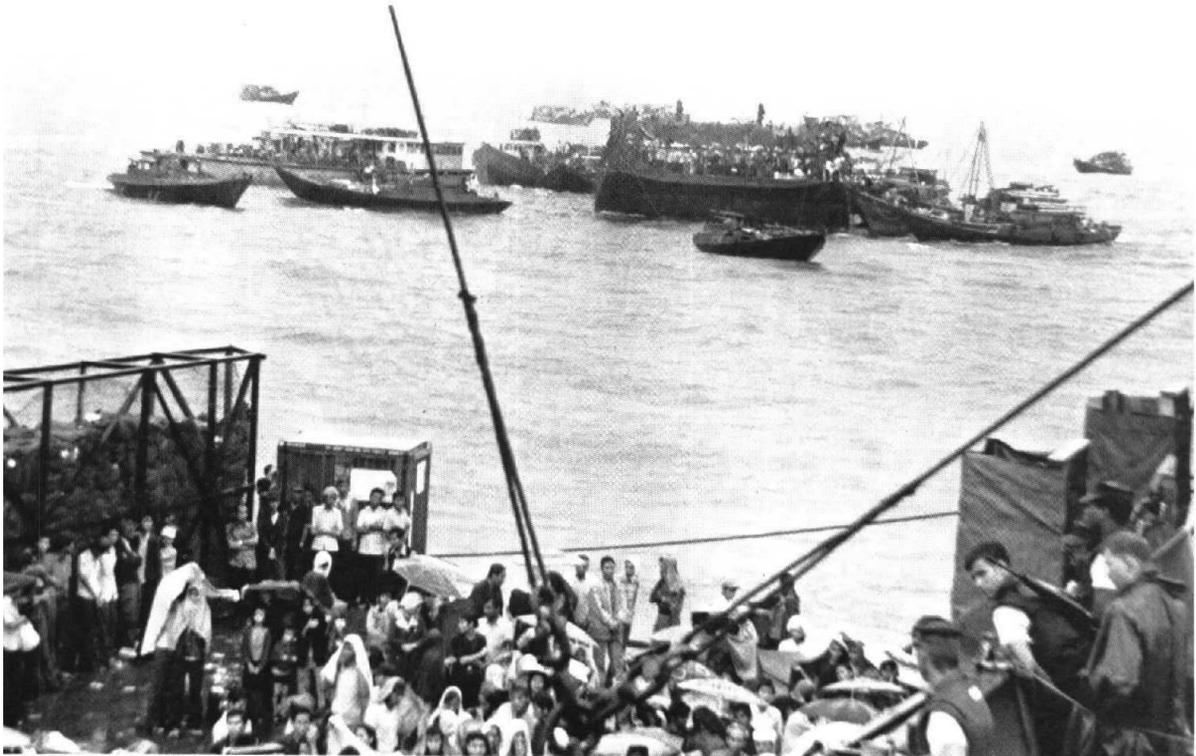
\*During the time the *Hancock* was in Singapore, the Vice President of the United States was attending Chiang-Kai Shek's funeral in Taipei, 15-17 April. The Ford administration took this opportunity to schedule a secret meeting between Vice President Nelson Rockefeller and the leader of the Vietnamese Senate, Tran Van Lan. No available records reveal whether the meeting was actually held or its contents.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 1162056  
AESF Marines enforce a sanitization check for weapons among Vietnamese refugees on board the Green Port.

As Rogish said, "this did not make sense because just a few short days ago they had sent us to Singapore, telling us they would not need us because the South Vietnam government looked like it would be able to hold on."<sup>20</sup>

Back on station in the South China Sea, the *Hancock* received word on 29 April that the extraction force should be over the zone at 1200 local (time of receipt approximately 1130). Six hours later, Lieutenant Rogish received his next shock. Suddenly, without warning, the flight section in which he was flying was diverted to the American Embassy instead of the briefed pick-up point, the Defense Attache Office Compound. The next surprise followed immediately upon its heels. As the four "Lady Ace" CH-46s cleared the area, they radioed the Embassy that they had just departed with 100 evacuees on board. The staff "rogered" the Lady Ace call and replied that they still had 200 refugees awaiting extraction. Having listened to virtually the same transmission on their inbound leg, the HMM-165 pilots experienced first shock then anger. Lieutenant Rogish said, "We knew right then that in effect what they were doing was lying about the number of people they had to go which left us in the dark during most of the operation as to what we really had to move. Consequently, despite pilots



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 7711275

*Vietnamese barges and sampans approach SS Sergeant Andrew Miller off Vung Tau. Marines from AESF Detachment Sierra, right foreground, guard the boarding platform.*

taking back load after load, we never really knew what we had left to do.”<sup>21</sup>

This meant that not only would 9th MAB helicopter pilots not know how many people still awaited rescue, but also neither would the receiving ships and their Marine security guards. With 257 Marines spread among eight MSC ships and the *Barbour County*, the AESF believed it was as ready as it could be, but never did it suspect the arrival of 30,000 refugees in 30 hours (the majority would arrive by sea). Certainly, no one, save possibly the Ambassador, expected more than 100 from the Embassy. U.S. Army Major General John R. D. Cleland’s post-action investigation of Frequent Wind stated: “The evacuation at the U.S. Embassy was not a coordinated action. This resulted from the confusion as to the total number of evacuees to be transported which was never made clear, and the lack of the necessary command and control to properly accomplish evacuation requirements. The GSF had only scheduled a single helicopter lift from the Embassy, hence no plan existed for the large volume of evacuees assembled there. Inasmuch as the Embassy plan was for a minimum evacuation from that location, the execution of the unplanned lift became essentially a ‘seat of the pants’ operation.”<sup>22</sup>

As a result of this “seat of the pants” operation, Lieutenant Rogish and every available CH-46 pilot continued making trips to the Embassy rooftop, while the AESF Marines screened and loaded the seemingly unlimited supply of refugees. As soon as they arrived on the MSC ships, the Marines processed the South Vietnamese and placed them in predesignated areas. In the case of the *Pioneer Commander*, India Detachment loaded 4,020 evacuees in little over 12 hours.<sup>23</sup>

The problems the *Pioneer Commander* and its Marines overcame during this phase of Frequent Wind typify the MSC and AESF’s efforts. Captain Cyril V. Moyher, the detachment’s commander, assisted by his NCO-in-charge, Gunnery Sergeant Robert Wicker, oversaw this difficult evolution. Captain Moyher related how it began: “At 1330 on 29 April 1975, the code word ‘Deckhouse’ was received over the MSC Broadcast Net. Deckhouse was the code word for us to depart our waiting position and head for the refugee pick-up point off the coast of Vietnam.”<sup>24</sup> Shortly after this, the ship attached a causeway to its side and at about 1815 the evacuees started arriving in Mike boats. Despite the presence of numerous small fishing craft which appeared soon after the first Mike boat, the orderly processing of refugees from the Navy ships con-

tinued until about 2200. The commander of Task Group 76.5, Surface Evacuation Forces, Captain James D. Tregurtha, USN, credited predeployment preparations for the ease with which refugees were moved between ships.\* He recently recalled, "One of the reasons refugee processing was handled fairly smoothly was that during predeployment workup and a MAU-size practice landing at Camp Pendleton, we had male and female volunteers from the amphibious base at Coronado act as refugees. They were bussed up to the landing zone where they were interrogated, identified, and accommodated on the ships."<sup>25</sup>

While Mike boats continued to deliver Vietnamese refugees to the *Pioneer Commander* well into the pre-dawn morning of the next day (Wednesday, 30 April), the last Mike boat in the first wave unloaded its passengers at 2200 and departed. This gap in traffic left, for the first time that day, the loading ramp/causeway unguarded and accessible. With its sides unprotected, the platform offered an opportunity which the circling Vietnamese vessels did not decline. Gunner Sergeant Robert Wicker recalled what happened next:

The departure of the Mike boats left the platform open on three sides, and the population on the platform increased from 8 Marines in a matter of minutes to 200, 500, 1,000 refugees and they were jumping on and off boats, passing kids and household effects until the platform was packed. With the mad scramble by the refugees driving the Marines back until they were pressed around the base of the accommodation ladder, it became impossible to process the air evacuees to which the Navy had given priority. The platform was slowly cleared after Marines were placed on the outer edges of the platform to keep the fishing boats away. Utilizing the Interrogator-Translator people and a Vietnamese priest we were able to get the crowd settled down.<sup>26</sup>

The work of loading the passengers from Mike boats continued until 0400 when the last of the refugees from the Navy ships boarded. At this point, the rush to occupy the platform began again, and this time order could not be restored. As a consequence, the ship hoisted its accommodation ladder with the Marines still on it, and this act finally made an impression. Gunner Sergeant Wicker recalled, "The refugees were informed that we would leave them if they did not

become orderly, quiet, and with as little confusion as possible start to board the ship."<sup>27</sup>

By sunrise, all of the refugees on the platform had been loaded and the *Pioneer Commander* then directed seven newly arrived vessels to nearby MSC ships. Still, the scene that Wednesday morning (30 April) was one of utter chaos with the sea crowded with abandoned fishing boats; some burning, some dead in the water, and some circling with their helms tied down and their motors running. Avoiding these dangerous shipping hazards, the *Pioneer Commander* weighed anchor and proceeded to the holding area. Once there, it waited for other ships to join it for the express purpose of forming a convoy for the voyage to Subic. The *Pioneer Commander* spent the next 20 hours embarking an additional 650 people, 200 of them from the *Greenville Victory*. After a health and sanitization check, Navy medical personnel gave the *Pioneer Commander*, the *Pioneer Contender* and the *American Challenger* medical clearance for a trip not to exceed five days. The first two ships in the convoy, *Pioneer Commander* and *Pioneer Contender*, pulled up their anchors at 0230 on 2 May and headed for Subic Bay at 21 knots.

Shortly before their departure the deluge of refugees peaked and then began to subside. During this period, the third ship in the convoy, the *American Challenger*, remained in the holding area and assisted the overcrowded *Greenville Victory* by relieving it of 3,000 Vietnamese refugees. Once loaded, the *American Challenger* set off in pursuit of the *Pioneer Commander* and *Pioneer Contender*.

Thirty-eight hours later, while approaching Subic Bay, the *Pioneer Commander* received word of a new destination, Guam. Less than two hours after that, while undergoing a night medical resupply by helicopter, the *Pioneer Commander* steamed out of Subic Bay and headed for Apra Harbor, Guam, leaving the *Pioneer Contender* behind. Meanwhile, the third ship to leave the holding area, the *American Challenger*, received its updated orders: proceed directly to Guam.

While *American Challenger*, *Pioneer Commander*, and *Pioneer Contender* headed for Subic, the MSC ships and their Marine security detachments wrestled with the most serious challenge still confronting them, disarming the remaining refugees. The combination of overcrowding, fatigue, and a never-ending stream of refugees, driven by a sense of finality or "no tomorrow," had created an extremely volatile situation. Stripping them of their weapons during the loading process

\*Captain Tregurtha also credited the logistic planning when he added: "Success of the evacuation was also due to the setting of a goal prior to deployment that all ships would deploy with no 'Cas-Reps' (disabled or non-functioning equipment). This was accomplished and the squadron transited to Vietnam and operated for over a month before the first 'CasRep' occurred. By then our job had been completed." Tregurtha Comments.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A801627  
*Marine LCpl M. R. Bishop of the AESF operates a water point for refugees on board the SS American Racer enroute to Guam. This ship and the SS Transcolorado departed Subic Bay for the island of Guam on 5 May with more than 10,000 refugees between them.*

quickly became tedious and eventually dangerous, occasionally leading to physical confrontations.

In one instance, Captain Richard L. "Rick" Reuter, the Echo Detachment commander, barely averted a disastrous and catastrophic panic on board the *Sergeant Kimbro* when some Vietnamese physically resisted sanitization. Captain Reuter responded to this crisis by calling in a reaction force from the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines. The mere presence of these additional Marines, who had arrived by helicopter from the nearby task force, calmed the people enough to enable Reuter's men to reestablish control. In the case of many refugees, the overwhelming fear of being left behind to the mercy of the Communist invaders was intensified by the absence of food or water. Many of the refugees had seen neither of these necessities for more than four days.

Yet by 2300, 1 May, every evacuee, save a few hundred, had access to at least water, and by mid-morning, 2 May, almost every evacuee had received some form of sustenance. By late morning that Friday

(2 May), every MSC ship had reached capacity except the *Sergeant Kimbro* which continued to load refugees until the afternoon of the next day. By nightfall on 2 May, MSC ships had embarked nearly 40,000 refugees while a newly arrived Navy ship, the *Barbour County*, with a recently assigned detachment of Marines led by First Lieutenant David A. Kratchovil, had loaded an additional 958 evacuees. With all but a few of the AESF Marine detachments on MSC ships and the loading of Vietnamese refugees virtually complete, CinCPac transferred control of the AESF from General Carey to Rear Admiral Whitmire and his task force on 3 May. The admiral's mission would be to ensure the refugees' safe arrival in Guam.<sup>28</sup>

That night, as the *Pioneer Commander* and the *American Challenger* set course for Guam, the *Pioneer Contender*, which they had left behind, pulled alongside the pier at Grande Island and began unloading a third of its passengers. The transfer of these 2,000 Vietnamese coincided with the transfer of command of the AESF to Admiral Whitmire, and began its final phase of the evacuation. Six hours later, the *Pioneer Contender* and its AESF Detachment Victor departed for Guam, fully resupplied and carrying the remaining 4,000 refugees. Less than 36 hours later, on 5 May, the *Transcolorado* with Hotel Detachment embarked and the *American Racer* with Mike Detachment on board left the Philippines for Apra Harbor. Nearly exceeding capacity, the two ships counted more than 10,000 refugees. The *Greenville Victory*, *Sergeant Andrew Miller*, and *Green Forest*, because of overcrowding and unsanitary conditions, had to unload their passengers at Subic, as did the *Green Port*.

A Tango detachment squad leader, then-Sergeant J. C. Owens, recalled the unhealthy state of affairs on the *Green Forest* in 1975, "The most ridiculous and unsanitary condition was created when they hung the portable toilets over the ship's railing and the Vietnamese after using them threw the toilet paper through the holes. Before you knew it there was used toilet paper streaming from every part of the ship not to mention those pieces of paper that landed on our sleeping bags, laying on the ship's after deck. A more unhealthy situation could not have existed." These unsatisfactory living conditions caused the medical authorities to declare these four ships unfit for habitation until thoroughly cleaned. Once sanitary conditions were restored then and only then could refugees reboard these MSC ships (*Greenville Victory*, *Sergeant Andrew Miller*, *Green Forest*, and *Green Port*).<sup>29</sup>



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 1163161

*Men of Detachment Tango, AEF, help Vietnamese sailors and dependents up the gangway of SS Green Forest at Subic. Overcrowding caused sanitation problems on MSC ships.*

*Having sailed from Vung Tau to Subic Bay on board their own ships, members of the South Vietnamese Navy prepare to embark on board SS Green Forest at Subic. The Philippines government would not let any refugees remain at Subic Bay more than 72 hours.*

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 1163149





Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 1175628

*Pioneer Commander unloads its refugees at the pier in Apra Harbor, Guam, on 7 May 1975. Once all of the evacuees were clear of the ship, Capt Cyril V. Moyher led his Detachment India to their temporary quarters on Guam before returning to Okinawa on 10 May.*

As these events were unfolding, the *Pioneer Commander* and the *American Challenger* were racing toward Guam. The *Pioneer Commander* probably would have been the first MSC ship to deposit seaborne Vietnamese refugees on American soil except for an old naval tradition endowing the senior skipper in a convoy with the privilege of entering port first. The Commander of Marine Detachment November on board the *American Challenger*, Captain Michael T. Mallick, recently recalled that part of the journey: "Enroute to Guam, the *Pioneer Commander* was ordered to reduce speed so as to allow the *American Challenger* to reach Guam first, the reason being the skipper of the *Challenger* (Captain Bouchie) was senior. We arrived at 0115 on 7 May, deposited 5200 refugees on Guam and departed before dawn."<sup>30</sup>

The *Pioneer Commander* arrived in Guam at 0800 on 7 May and it too began unloading almost immediately. By noon every one of the refugees had left the ship, beginning the first of their many days on the island of Guam. For three of those days, the Marine contingent from the *Pioneer Commander*, India Detachment, would also remain on the island, at the Marine Barracks, Guam. At 0630, 10 May, these AESF

Marines boarded a bus and rode to Andersen Air Force Base where a C-141 waited to fly them to Okinawa. Captain Moyher, the detachment commander, summed up the experience: "On the morning of 7 May we entered the harbor at Guam and discharged 4,678 evacuees. Prior to disembarking, the refugees presented the detachment with a set of lacquered 4 seasons plaques and a letter of thanks."<sup>31</sup>

By 7 May, the *American Racer*, accompanied by Mike Detachment and carrying most of the remaining Frequent Wind refugees (including those that the *Green Port* had unloaded on 5 May), was less than 24 hours from completing the mission Admiral Gayler had tasked Rear Admiral Whitmire with five days earlier: safe passage to Guam for all of the Frequent Wind evacuees. At approximately the same time that Wednesday afternoon, the AESF control group, detachments Quebec, Papa, and Romeo, 17th ITT, and MP personnel began screening, unloading, and processing the refugees on board 29 Vietnamese Navy ships which had escaped from South Vietnam. They attempted to ensure that these refugees spent as little time as possible in Subic in order to honor the wishes of the Philippines Government that no refugee remain in

that country more than 72 hours. Major Quinlan reported, "This pierside operation involved processing the refugees, many of whom had to be disarmed, from ships ranging in size from gunboat to destroyer escort, then immediately embarking them on board waiting evacuation ships. In less than 24 hours over 20,000 people were unloaded, processed, and reembarked without incident. This herculean effort was directed by First Lieutenant Johnnie Johnson and Chief Warrant Officer Al Kent."<sup>32</sup>

On 8 May, the final phase started when the *Green Port* (carrying a new detachment, Kilo, which had replaced Papa on 5 May), and *Green Wave* (Detachment Uniform) left Subic Bay. These two ships, with 7,522 evacuees on board, preceded by one day the *Sergeant Andrew Miller's* (Detachment Sierra) departure with 3,200 refugees. Tango Detachment and the *Green Forest* joined these ships the next day when it boarded the last of the large groups of refugees (more than 4,000) and took them to Guam. Between the time the *American Challenger* deposited its load of evacuees at Guam and returned to Subic (7-10 May), the refugee camps on Guam had reached their capacity. No longer could Guam handle large groups, and consequently the *American Challenger* and its security detachment (November) were released from evacuation operations.\* Eleven days later, after the remainder of his detachments, save one, had also been released, Major Quinlan and his command group departed Subic. They left behind one detachment (Foxtrot) on the *Greenville Victory*. Remaining for the exclusive purpose of assisting in any future refugee operations, they returned to Okinawa after six days of waiting without action. With Detachment Foxtrot's arrival on 27 May, the AESF's function, in effect, ceased. Two days prior to this, Admiral Whitmire had returned control of the AESF to III MAF. On 31 May 1975, Maj General Hoffman made the termination official by deactivating the unit.<sup>33</sup>

#### *A Vietnamese City in Guam*

On Guam the American Command prepared to receive the expected flood of refugees. On 23 April a message from Admiral Gayler to his representative on Guam read: "JCS has directed immediate implementation Vietnamese refugee support at Guam."<sup>34</sup> This, by no coincidence, came at the same time the Philip-

pine Government notified the American Embassy in Manila that the refugees could not remain in the country. Guam, only three hours flight time by C-130 from Cubi, offered an excellent solution to the diplomatic dilemma.

Earlier notification and more preparation might have eliminated a series of problems on Guam, but the alarmingly large number of evacuees seemed to surprise Washington. Despite the short notice, Marine Barracks Guam jumped into Operation New Life with enthusiasm and energy. That alone would not be enough to overcome the absence of time to plan and prepare, forcing in many instances the barrack's 11 officers and 333 men simply to react. "Having received word that we could anticipate involvement in the refugee program on the morning of 23 April 1975, the first refugees arrived Camp Asan at 1820 hours on 24 April. Planning therefore was brief and simple."<sup>35</sup>

Colonel Gene M. "Jinx" McCain's first act, once having received notification of the operation, was to call a staff meeting. Just prior to it, he learned that Admiral Gayler had directed that the old Asan Hospital Annex, deserted since 1973, would be used as the site of the Vietnamese refugee center. Besides discussing this topic during the meeting, Colonel McCain detailed the initial responsibilities of his staff. He told them that he would serve as the commanding officer, Camp Asan, and that Lieutenant Colonel Charles W. Gobat would be his deputy. In addition, Captain Eugene R. Hardman and Captain Charles R. Provini became the Camp Asan executive and operations officers, respectively. First Lieutenant Ronald E. Spratt learned that he would fill the billet of camp supply officer.

That same day, immediately after the morning meeting, Captains Hardman and Provini, accompanied by Lieutenant Spratt, visited the site of the new refugee center. They found two years of rubble and hundreds of seabees furiously attempting to put the place in habitable condition. Immediately, they set to work devising a scheme that would enable them to accept their first arrivals in less than 24 hours. Categorizing their anticipated concerns into general management areas, they formed three working groups, each with three subsections. The first, administration, contained population control and accounting, locator system, and billeting assignments. The second, operations, oversaw processing (both in and out), an interpreter pool, and coordination/liaison. The third group, logistics, involved food services, supply, and sanitation.

For every organization and participant, the foremost

\*Captain Mallick related: "The *American Challenger* with 27 members of November Detachment and myself proceeded to Subic where we were assigned to provide security for 27 Cambodian/Vietnamese ships." Mallick Comments.



Department of Defense Photo (USN) 2777

*Camp Asan awaits the arrival of its first refugees under Operation New Life. South Vietnamese and evacuees of other nationalities started arriving in Guam at 1820 on 24 April.*

concern was meeting the incoming buses and obtaining a valid manifest. With this in hand, they then could assign billeting, plan meals, and organize linen/bedding issue. The task of refurbishing the old hospital annex in less than 24 hours presented a nearly impossible undertaking. Formidable as the job appeared, no other choices existed and the Marines and Seabees on Guam turned all their attention to meeting this deadline. When the first busloads of refugees arrived the next day, the Navy-Marine Corps team had four of the 15 barracks ready. The new occupants also found blankets, sleeping gear, and food awaiting them.

The initial buses took their passengers to Building 502 for processing and orientation. Next, the Marines showed the refugees their new living spaces with its dimensions and assignment based on the size of the family. From here, the new occupants moved to blanket issue after which the Marine hosts gave them the choice of either going to bed or to the messhall. At Building 548, hot rice and tea awaited their arrival. This process would be repeated thousands of times before Operation New Life ended and Camp Asan closed its doors. By the following day, 25 April, Camp Asan had a population of 5,000 people. On that Friday, the first departing group left Camp Asan for Andersen Air Force Base, and a flight from Guam to the United States. After that, a continuous flow of arrivals and departures became the routine.<sup>36</sup>

Colonel McCain later related that by the time the first refugees arrived at 1800 on 24 April, he had established a complete camp organization to provide full support including administration, billeting, baggage handling, messing, medical, transportation, clothing, and location of relatives. By 1130 on 26 April, the organization administratively processed 6,420 arrivals, adding them to the camp rolls. This effort involved not only the Marines on Guam but also their families as well. Marine wives assisted with the initial reception and processing of evacuees, including the collection and distribution of clothing and baby supplies.<sup>37</sup>

The first evacuees came to Guam via Air Force C-141s and C-130s. Landing at Andersen Air Force base, they soon found themselves at an increasingly more crowded Camp Asan. Despite the fact that each aircraft could only transport a hundred or so Vietnamese per sortie, Camp Asan quickly reached its capacity. Within less than 48 hours of the first arrival, Colonel McCain requested a 48-hour moratorium in order to give his Marines a chance to stabilize the situation in the camp and continue to upgrade the facilities. During the moratorium, only 17 new refugees entered the camp and more importantly at this juncture, Admiral Gayler decided to increase the number of camps and make Colonel McCain the overall commander of Naval Refugee Camps, Guam.

In his initial message establishing a refugee support

center, Admiral Gayler told Colonel McCain to expect an initial input of 10,000-13,000 with a rapid buildup to 50,000. He said, "The center's operation is expected to last a minimum of 90 days."<sup>38</sup> With these requirements in mind and after having surveyed the initial situation at Asan during the moratorium, Colonel McCain reported to the Commandant of the Marine Corps that he would need eight officers and 225 staff noncommissioned officers and enlisted men to accomplish this task. Little did he know then the volume and rate at which refugees would arrive, and that the operation would last double the forecasted minimum. Besides Marine Barracks, Guam's involvement, Colonel McCain enlisted the assistance of 10 men from Marine Detachment, USS *Proteus* (AS 19) (a submarine tender), as a working party to assist in establishing a refugee camp at Orote Point, Guam. He also obtained permission to assign one officer and 60 Marines from his Company C as a force to participate in the conversion of a local hotel into an evacuee billeting site.<sup>39</sup>

As Operation New Life unfolded, the Marines' involvement significantly expanded. Besides assisting in the opening of new camps, the Marines worked on the docks meeting the Military Sealift Command ships as they arrived; their efforts made the refugees' initial transition easier. From the unloading of the ships to the processing of the refugees, the Marines had one philosophy: as much as possible, make the evacuees feel at home. Captain Provini, who had witnessed refugee resettlement efforts in Vietnam in 1972, offered his advice based on the South Vietnamese Government's handling of the former Quang Tri residents. His experiences and ideas were instrumental in developing this "Welcome Home" philosophy. He pointed out that the refugees coming south after the fall of northern I Corps in 1972 received a very regimented welcome. The South Vietnamese Government officials placed them into holding areas for subsequent relocation and readmittance into society. The consequences of this were tragic; the refugees experienced confusion and fear. Eventually, they rebelled and this act provoked their countrymen into using force against them. As a result, these South Vietnamese felt like prisoners in their own country.<sup>40</sup>

Avoiding such aggressive behavior became the focus and intent of the Marines on Guam. The camp guards and staff made every effort to let the Vietnamese know that they could expect the best treatment possible. Upon arrival at Camp Asan, the Vietnamese departed their buses for their first event, a "welcome aboard"

brief. At this initial meeting, and throughout their stay, chaplains always made their presence known by announcing that they, too, were available to assist and counsel anyone in need. Besides their well-timed human relations training, the Marines acted with one purpose, "to show compassion and consideration to the refugees." To further enhance their image and present a sharp appearance, the Marines at the refugee operation center always wore the uniform prescribed for the occasion. Those working at Camp Asan wore their modified blue uniform instead of combat gear, for two reasons. They hoped to provide a favorable first impression to the Vietnamese to reduce their anxieties, and they wanted to make them feel welcome in their new home. The Marines thought combat gear would remind the refugees too much of the war and the pain they had left behind.<sup>41</sup>

By presenting the appearance of a city with a friendly living environment, the Camp Asan Marines gained the confidence and trust of the new arrivals. Using this trust, they induced the refugees to form their own community structure and govern themselves. Once the refugees elected a mayor for their new "city," the Marines assumed advisory roles and became even less conspicuous. The elected official, "Tony" Lam, assumed the title of Vietnamese camp manager, and retained this function until transfer to the states on 23 July. Lam's departure signalled the end of the camp's outstanding internal command network. For three months (April 25-July 23), Lam and his organization virtually ran the Asan camp.<sup>42</sup>

Satisfied with the progress and developments at Camp Asan, Colonel McCain redeployed some of his Asan Marines to the satellite camps: Tokyu Hotel, Camp Socio, and J&G Construction Camp. Despite the move, their mission remained the same, "to organize, supervise, assist and take care of the refugee populations within these camps."<sup>43</sup>

Throughout this endeavor, Colonel McCain received his guidance for the conduct and running of the camp from Admiral Gayler's representative on Guam, Rear Admiral George F. Morrison. Admiral Morrison actively participated in the refugee operation and after an initial briefing of Colonel McCain and his staff on 23 April, he personally visited Camp Asan at least two more times. One of those times, on 9 May, Rear Admiral Morrison escorted the overall commander, Admiral Gayler (CinCPac), through Camp Asan.

Apparently satisfied with Colonel McCain's handling of the operation, Admiral Morrison changed Colonel McCain's title from Camp Coordinator of all



Photo courtesy of BGen James A. Herbert, USA (Ret)

*Orote Point, a former airfield, was the most isolated and most secure of the camps. When repatriates threatened violence, Capt Howard P. Shores III reminded them of Orote Point.*

camps under Navy jurisdiction to Military Support Officer, New Life Guam, effective 1 August. His new mission responsibilities entailed coordinating with the Senior Civil Coordinator to provide necessary administrative, logistical, and operational support for the internal camp functioning. He also provided guidance to the Marines who were carrying out these functions. Colonel McCain insured above all else that they avoided law enforcement activities in the camps, maintaining as minimal a military presence as possible.

Just prior to Colonel McCain's redesignation, Rear Admiral Kent J. Carroll replaced Admiral Morrison as Commander, Naval Forces, Marianas (ComNavMar) and overall military coordinator for refugee operations. At about the same time, the newly designated Senior Civil Coordinator arrived. Julia Taft, the Director of the Interagency Task Force (IATF) for Indochina Refugees, had appointed retired Army Brigadier General James A. Herbert to head a team of representatives responsible for coordinating the processing and preparation of refugees for shipment to the United States. The Senior Civil Coordinator and the Military Support Officer soon would work closely together in solving the "repatriate" problem and bringing to a close the refugee operation on Guam.<sup>44</sup>

Colonel McCain's redesignation reflected the changing complexion of the camps' population. As each new group of refugees boarded a flight for the continental United States, the percentage of those remaining who desired to return to Vietnam increased. Known as

"repatriates," the potential danger they represented, and their alarming threats, grew as they approached a majority.\* As this problem intensified, the Marines had to take overt action to stem the growing threat of violence. Captain Howard P. Shores III, the commander of Camp Socio, before taking control of what later became the Socio repatriate camp, received only one instruction, "insure that the camp functions."<sup>45</sup>

To accomplish this security mission, Captain Shores had no choice but to deal directly with the leader of the repatriates, Colonel Quay (political leader) and his assistants, Captain Tam (political second in command) and Major Hai (administrative leader). Upon their initial meeting, Colonel Quay stated his position: "The only thing we want is to be able to repatriate to Vietnam and we will do anything including

\*Recently, General Herbert explained the origin of the repatriates and the extent of the problem: "VNN ships were evacuated with crews. The crews never contacted their families, who remained in Vietnam. The same was true of some VNAF aircraft (C-130s which were flown to Thailand) crews whose families were in SVN. There were families sent out in the refugee stream whose (husbands) did not make it and were in SVN. Most of the repatriation group wished for family reunification, regardless of the cost. All of those who expressed a desire to leave were moved to Camp Asan, as other camps were closed out." General Herbert's task upon arriving in early August as the newly designated Senior Civil Coordinator "was to resettle about 6,000 refugees remaining on Guam, to assemble repatriates from Eglin, Indiantown, Chaffee, and Pendleton on Guam and care for them there until the 'repatriate problem' was solved." Herbert Comments.

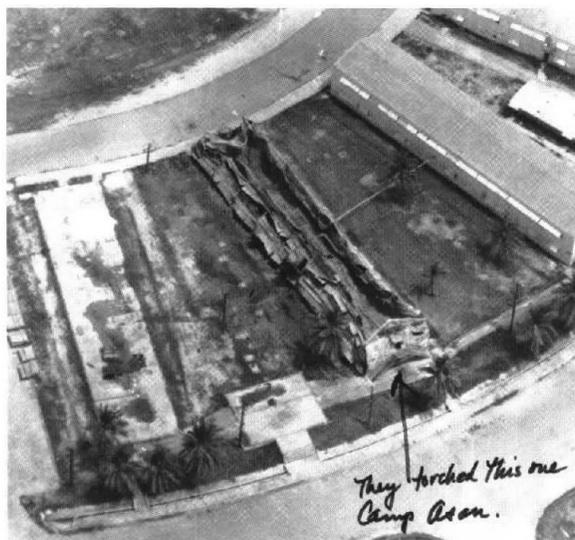


Photo courtesy of BGen James A. Herbert, USA (Ret)  
*Repatriates, protesting the delay in their return to Vietnam, burned this barracks at Camp Asan. Most of the repatriates were peaceful and only sought re-union with the families they had left behind.*

violence in order to accomplish this goal.”<sup>46</sup> Captain Shores explained to Quay that he did not have the authority to repatriate them and, while he did have the responsibility of making their stay comfortable, his first priority was the safety and welfare of his Marines. He asked Quay not to interpret compassion as a sign of weakness and reminded him that the first person to break the rules would be sent to the isolated and more primitive Orote Point where tighter security restrictions could be imposed. Thanks in large part to the establishment of these ground rules, Camp Socio did not have one dangerous incident. The only overt activity took place on 30 July 1975, when eight repatriates shaved their heads in protest. They objected to Captain Tam’s confinement at Orote Point for his part in the burning of a Camp Asan barracks.<sup>47</sup>

Eventually, by the end of August, all of the Socio occupants had been moved to Camp Asan. The marginal sewage pumps at Socio inspired that decision when they malfunctioned two times in three days, spilling more than 8,000 gallons of raw sewage. These new occupants of Asan, 240 Vietnamese, still adamantly wanted to return to Vietnam despite a

\*General Herbert recently described that incident: “There were some ‘hot heads’ among the group of repatriates. They burned down a barracks and the group was told by me that we really did not care how many buildings were torched because the entire group would remain at Camp Asan until repatriation, with or without the comfort of a roof over their heads. There was no more violence.” Herbert Comments.

meeting with Brigadier General Herbert, who explained in detail the ramifications and dangers of repatriation.\*\* Still, they insisted on returning to their homeland. Consequently, on 15 October, they and the other repatriates of Camp Asan boarded a Vietnamese vessel, the *Thuong Tin I*. At 1230 the next day the ship with its 1,546 repatriates departed for Vietnam.\*\*\* Two weeks later, Camp Asan closed. With its closure, Operation New Life ended, having lasted nearly four months longer than its original forecast of 90 days.<sup>48</sup>

The repatriates by far had represented the gravest challenge to the overall refugee operation. Their contentious behavior and threatening demands prompted command changes at other satellite camps in addition to Socio’s. On 5 July because of repatriate problems, Colonel McCain assigned First Lieutenant Roger D. Gabelman as the commander of Camp J&G. He would remain there until two days after the transfer of that camp’s repatriates to Camp Asan on 20 August. First Lieutenant Keith L. Johnson received word the day Gabelman transferred his camp occupants that effective 22 August he would become the commander of Tokyu Hotel. Although Tokyu Hotel did not house any repatriates, it had its own problems. It contained hundreds of third-country nationals who awaited an immigration judge’s ruling on whether they qualified for American citizenship and benefits. On 10 September, he decided that they did not and ordered them deported. He ruled that the special law passed by Congress allowing the entry of Vietnamese refugees into the U.S. did not apply to them. Within two weeks of the order, all of the third-country nationals were

\*\*General Herbert mentioned his attempts to change the repatriates’ decision: “As the Senior Civil Coordinator, I had numerous sessions with the repatriate leadership and explained the probable actions to be taken by the Hanoi folks if they returned. They were for the large part committed to their family members remaining in Vietnam, regardless of the warnings.” Herbert Comments.

\*\*\*The Senior Civil Coordinator explained his participation in this undertaking: “We developed the plan to fix up the *Thuong Tin I* ship, convert the freighter to passenger use, and send the repatriates back. I obtained authority to seize the *Thuong Tin I* and ComNavMar was instructed by CNO via CinCPacFlt to repair it as necessary and fit it out to carry the repatriates. This job was done rapidly and well, at a cost of \$800,000, as I recall. On 16 October, with outstanding support from Rear Admiral Kent Carroll and the combined efforts of the Naval Ship Repair Facility, Marine Barracks Guam, Naval Logistics Center, and the IATF team, the *Thuong Tin I* set sail with 1,546 repatriates on board from Agana for Saigon.” He added that he still had the text of a lawsuit in which he was sued for \$3,000,000 for his part in the seizure of the ship. Herbert Comments.

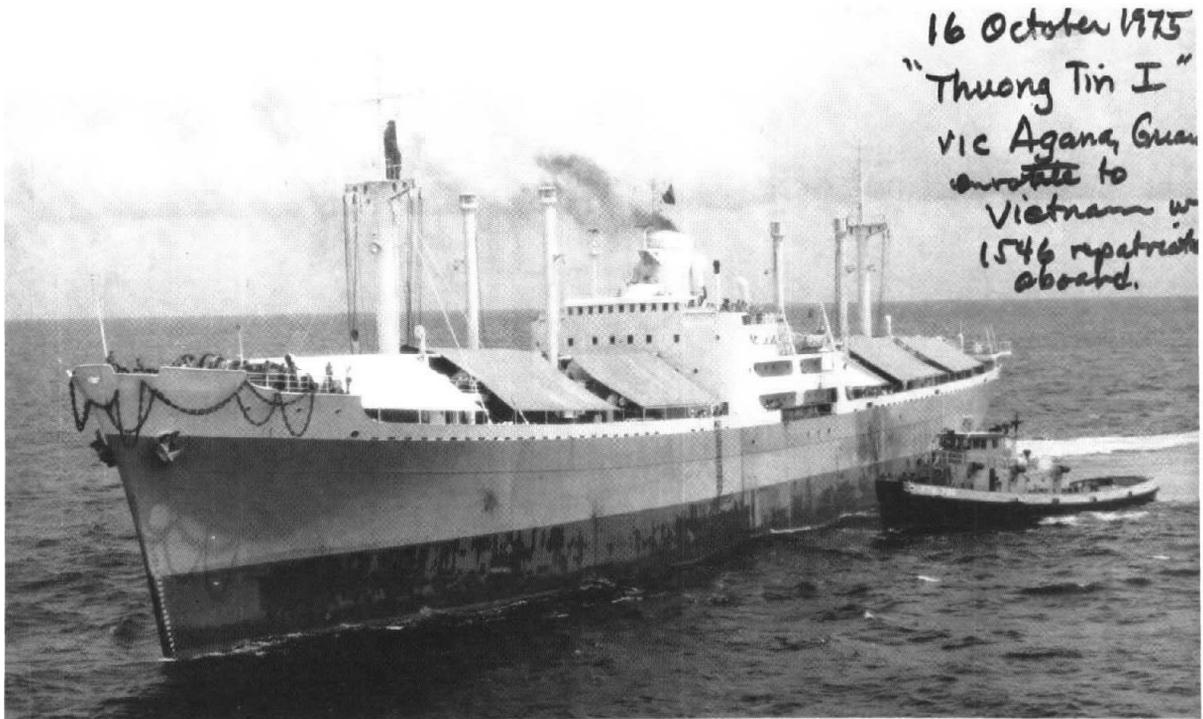


Photo courtesy of BGen James A. Herbert, USA (Ret)

*Thuong Tin I gets underway for Vietnam on 16 October with 1,546 repatriates on board.*

returned to their native countries, leaving only a few hundred Vietnamese refugees. On 23 October, after having found sponsors for these last few evacuees, including the 123 who had elected to live on Guam, the Tokyu Hotel closed its doors.

Having successfully accomplished its refugee mission on Guam, the Marine Barracks Guam justly gave credit to the additional forces whose assistance Colonel McCain had needed as early as April when he employed Marines from the *Proteus*. Other units external to his battalion which Colonel McCain used during the course of the operation included Company E, 2d Battalion, 3d Marines, 1st Marine Brigade, who arrived on Guam for temporary duty on 5 July 1975, and Company F, 2d Battalion, 3d Marines, 1st Marine Brigade, who joined them on 24 July. These elements departed Guam for Hawaii on 23 September 1975.

The Marines from 1st Brigade and the Marine Barracks Guam combined forces in the final months to insure that no repatriate or disconsolate refugee harmed or endangered life or property. Considering the fact that the only reported casualties during the entire operation involved two auto-related deaths (a retired Army sergeant and a Marine off the *Proteus*), one would have to conclude that their efforts to protect life and property were extremely successful.

*A South Vietnamese child enjoys an American favorite. Within days this child would be on her way to America and a new beginning at Camp Pendleton.*

Photo courtesy of Capt James D. Tregurtha, USN (Ret)



Processing more than 100,000 refugees, including a one-day camp population high of 7,221 in Asan on 10 June, they expended thousands of hours and helped move the refugees one step closer to the final link in their chain to freedom.<sup>49</sup>

*The Final Link: Camp Pendleton*

When the base duty officer at Camp Pendleton answered the phone on Saturday, 26 April 1975, he was intrigued to hear the voice at the other end identify himself as the Headquarters Marine Corps Command Duty Officer. Even more intriguing was what he said next, could Camp Pendleton house and administer Vietnamese refugees? The Pendleton duty officer immediately passed the call to the chief of staff, Colonel Tullis J. Woodham, Jr., who, in turn, notified the base commander, Brigadier General Paul G. Graham.\* The duty officer added that headquarters had said it would be very unlikely for Pendleton to be selected because it was a fully operational base, but just the same they still needed the answer to the feasibility question by midnight that day. This unexpected event would serve as General Graham's only advance warning that his base would be used as a refugee processing facility. Despite assurances to the contrary, the inter-agency task force created as a result of President Ford's appeal to Congress on 10 April to help the Vietnamese refugees, eventually chose Camp Pendleton as one of its three receiving and processing sites in the continental United States.

General Graham later recalled: "The first inkling I had of the possibility of establishing a refugee camp was about 1730 on Saturday afternoon on the 26th of April."<sup>50</sup> He related that after Colonel Tullis Woodham told him of the Headquarters Marine Corps inquiry. Graham told Woodham "we had better get together and talk it over with all the assistant chiefs of staff." He then "set up a meeting for seven o'clock that evening."<sup>51</sup> At that meeting, General Graham and the assistant chiefs of staff discussed whether Camp Pendleton could handle such a facility even though Headquarters had said it ". . . really did not have to worry about being selected as a refugee facility because of the size of the base and the amount of training we do here . . ." <sup>52</sup> After exploring the various facets of

such a possibility and viewing engineer studies and maps of the base, they decided that the northern section of the base at Camp Talega could handle a refugee center. General Graham stated, "after looking at all the aspects of Talega, we came to the conclusion that we probably could put a facility up there, but it would have to be a tent facility, under field conditions."<sup>53</sup> That evening General Graham informed Headquarters Marine Corps that Camp Pendleton could build a facility to handle 18,000 refugees, but under austere living conditions.

At 0720, shortly after arriving at work Monday, 28 April, General Graham received a call from his chief of staff. Colonel Woodham informed him that ". . . Pendleton had been selected as the reception center for the refugees."<sup>54</sup> From this point, the news only seemed to get worse as the chief of staff told his base commander that refugees were scheduled to start arriving anytime, and in fact some were already airborne. Indeed, the very refugees Colonel McCain's Marines had processed so quickly through Camp Asan were inbound to Marine Corps Air Station El Toro with a final destination of Camp Pendleton, California.

General Graham quickly moved to action, lining up support and translating his plans into productive results.\*\* He first sought assistance from the 1st Marine Division, whose commander, Brigadier General William L. McCulloch, readily provided two engineer battalions. According to Graham, "We had 1,500 to 1,700 people here about ten o'clock that morning (28 April). We brought about 10 bulldozers in. We just lined them up track-to-track, went right down in an area, leveled it off, brought the graders in and turned to the 1st Force Service Regiment to get the tents."<sup>55</sup> After some frantic telephoning that morning, the base commander felt a little more comfortable knowing that either the Marine Corps Supply Depot, Barstow, or the General Services Administration in Ogden, Utah, would provide additional tents and supplies as soon as they were needed. General Graham said, "We knew that if we were receiving refugees as fast as this first group, that we would be one step ahead of disaster unless we got some outside assistance very quick-

\*Colonel Woodham first contacted the staff. He stated: "General Graham was not notified immediately. I received the information in the early afternoon. I went directly to my office and attempted to make calls to key staff officers who could answer the basic question 'what if' and then told them to prepare for a meeting with the CG . . ." Woodham Comments.

\*\*Colonel Woodham related: "Initially, the major load rested on the shoulders of Colonel George A. 'Red' Merrill (assistant chief of staff for facilities) and Colonel Robert W. Calvert (assistant chief of staff for logistics and supply). At the JCS level the operation received support from Colonel Kenneth L. Robinson, Jr., and at the Headquarters level from Colonel Neil A. Nelson of the Installations and Logistics Division, HQMC." Woodham Comments.



Marine Corps Historical Collection

*Bulldozers prepare ground for the erection of hundreds of tents. Five hours before the official notification to establish a refugee camp at Pendleton, the first evacuees arrived.*

ly.”<sup>56</sup> They did receive this support and with it some well-timed local assistance. The combination made the center a success.

At the beginning, a favorable ending did not seem likely, especially after 800 bone-weary refugees arrived at El Toro at 0200 on 29 April, well before anyone expected them.\* Confused, tired, scared, and disoriented after having flown for 14 hours, these refugees arrived in their new country in the middle of a pitch black night. Many responded to the unfamiliar surroundings by simply crying. Marines at El Toro helped them board Marine Corps buses for the relatively short ride to Camp Talega (less than 45 minutes). General Graham immediately placed them in the Camp Talega quonset huts, which had been constructed years earlier as additional housing for Marine Corps units assigned to Camp Pendleton. His decision to postpone the mandatory processing procedure until morning saved the refugees from further suffering and allowed them some much-needed sleep.

The irony of this eleventh-hour arrival and the extreme crush it placed on General Graham’s forces was that the official authorization to perform resettlement duties did not arrive until after the first refugees had fallen asleep in their new home, the Camp Talega

\*Colonel Nicholas M. Trapnell, Jr., Chief of Staff, Marine Corps Air Station El Toro, had anticipated the refugees’ arrival. He related that the reason the processing went so smoothly at 0200, 29 April, was because of his prior knowledge of the evacuation plans. He gained that understanding while serving in Vietnam on the DAO staff from 1973 to 1974. He stated, “I initiated preparations for the refugees more than a week before receiving word from HQMC and by then the planning and rehearsal were complete.” Trapnell Comments.

“hotel.” At 0736 on 29 April, Headquarters Marine Corps sent a message to the commanding general of Camp Pendleton. It said, “Establish New Horizon Coordination Center and be prepared to provide billeting, messing, essential medical treatment, transportation, security, and camp administration for up to 18,000 evacuees.”<sup>57</sup> The next day the final authority arrived: “This message confirms previous oral arrangements that you take action required to establish and operate the Camp Pendleton Refugee Processing Center.”<sup>58</sup>

From this inauspicious beginning, Camp Pendleton more than sufficiently met the Joint Chiefs’ original objective: “The Marine Corps will be tasked to receive, process, billet, and support 18,000 (eighteen thousand) RVN evacuees for a period of 90 days or more commencing about 29 April 1975.”<sup>59</sup> To accomplish this, General Graham had to organize his forces, create a staff, and plan while still receiving more refugees each day.\*\* Complicating this matter was the presence of a dual system of command that functioned under the auspices of the State Department, which had overall responsibility for the South Vietnamese

\*\*Colonel Woodham related General Graham’s daily routine: “General Graham’s schedule entailed arriving at Base headquarters at 0715, taking care of pressing base matters, then boarding the standby UH-1E and flying to the refugee camp headquarters where he would stay until 1700, and finally returning to Base to make decisions on matters that had arisen during the day. In inclement weather, he would ride in his sedan and usually arrive back around 2000. Oftentimes his staff would remain at work until 2300 or later.” Colonel Woodham also described the inordinate importance the dimension of public relations assumed at staff headquarters when he said, “Refugee matters were constantly in the national news and as a consequence a TV was installed in my office to monitor day and night the media reports.” Woodham Comments.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 8607499

*Marines prepare to build a new city at Camp Pendleton, California. Marines participating in Operation New Arrival erected nearly 1,100 tents to house Vietnamese refugees.*

*This is an aerial view of BGen Graham's Vietnamese city. Each tent, weighing 360 pounds, required a minimum of 35 minutes for 10 men to erect it in this instant "urban area."*

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 8607508

