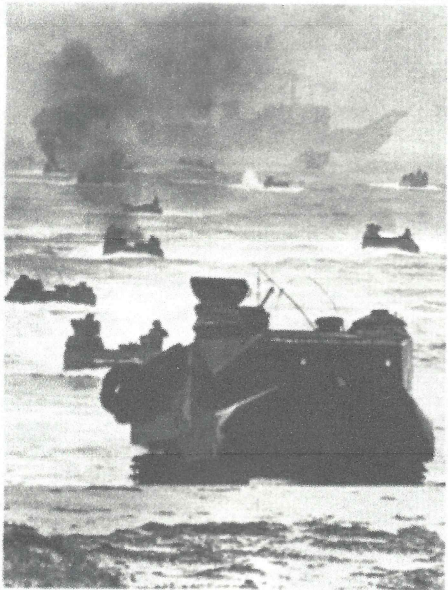




Page 2



Page 34



Page 38

ALL HANDS

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- 2 **BOAT PEOPLE . . . CONTINUING STORY**
Seventh Fleet sailors continue humanitarian rescues
- 8 **A LEARNING EXERCISE**
U.S. and South American sailors work together in UNITAS XXII
- 14 **TRAINING COMES TOGETHER AT FACSAC**
Facility coordinates major fleet exercises in offshore operating areas
- 18 **ELLIE'S NIGHT ON THE TOWN**
Navy Ceremonial Guard takes part in benefit for brittle bone disease research
- 20 **DUTY IN THE NATION'S CAPITAL**
The benefits of living and working in Washington, D.C.
- 28 **STARS AND STRIPES FOREVER**
Pennsylvania flag company turns out the red, white and blue
- 34 **'NO NOTICE' EXERCISE TESTS SWIFT REACTION**
Amphibious units practice to ensure safe civilian evacuation
- 38 **DECATUR—MAN OF CONFLICT**
Courage, honor, and love of the sea were his trademarks

Departments

30 Bearings

44 Currents

48 Reunions

Covers

Front: An oft-repeated but always thrilling moment during a Fourth of July fireworks display at the Washington Monument. Photo by PH2 Robert K. Hamilton.

Back: A flag company in Pennsylvania, where thousands of American flags are made for thousands of patriotic Americans. Photo by PH1 Jim Preston.

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Boat People... Continuing Story

"Help us, help us! We have no food or water! Please don't leave us!" The cries of thousands of Vietnamese boat people have become all too familiar to Seventh Fleet sailors. Refugees have fled Vietnam by the tens of thousands since the communist takeover, braving rough seas, monsoons, typhoons and pirates.

The U.S. Navy has been involved in the rescue of Vietnamese refugees since 1975; in the last three years alone, more than 8,000 boat people have been rescued in the South China Sea through the direct assistance of the Seventh Fleet. As of Dec. 30, 1981, more than 5,800 boat people have been embarked directly aboard U.S. Navy ships. Another 2,500 are known to have been embarked aboard civilian merchant ships after having been located by Navy P-3 Orion patrol aircraft.

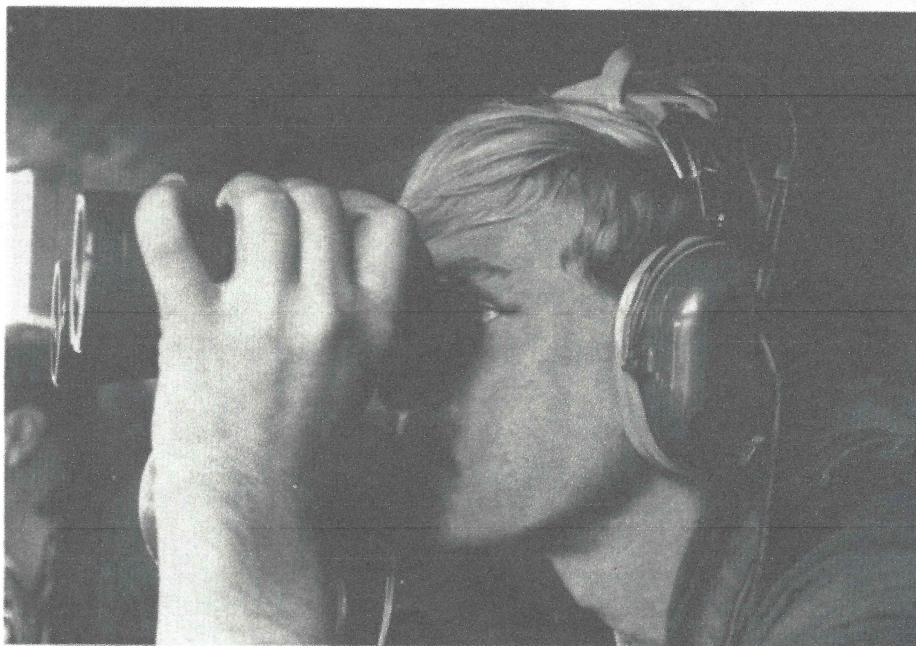
Boats loaded with fleeing Vietnamese often put out to sea with only the sun and stars to guide them. One group of refugees tried to cross more than 1,000 miles of choppy seas in a 20-foot inshore fishing boat, guided only by a map of Asia torn from an old atlas. When rescued, they had drifted to within 60 miles of Malaysia, still under the impression they were headed for the Philippines.

"Where do they get the guts to do it?" asked Operations Specialist Third Class Dan M. Bold aboard the USS *Francis Hammond* (FF 1067). "They get in a boat that doesn't look like it could be rowed across a lake, and here they are in rough weather in the middle of the South China Sea. It has to take a lot of guts."

And yet it continues. There have been more than 119 separate rescues by Seventh Fleet units, involving some 63 different ships. Ships from Yokosuka, Japan, have played a large part in the rescue operations. The guided missile cruiser USS *Reeves* (CG 24), in one rescue, accounted

for 79 refugees. The amphibious command ship USS *Blue Ridge* (LCC 19) has had two rescues accounting for 91; the USS *Worden* (CG 18) now operating out of San Diego and the USS *Towers* (DDG 9) have each had three rescues accounting for 119 and 128 refugees, respectively. *Francis Hammond* has had four separate rescues, involving 144 refugees.

Disbursing Clerk First Class Michael J. Couturier aboard the *Francis Hammond* has a personal interest in the rescues. Not only did he serve in Vietnam, but his wife is from there. "I feel sorry for the people," he said. "The boats are so small, I don't



Vietnamese refugees wait to be assisted aboard USS *White Plains* (AFS 4). Photo by Lt. j.g. Dave Riley. A VP-22 aircrewman in the South China Sea searches for refugee boats.

Boat People

know how they survive. But it's a great feeling when we can help. And every time we spot a refugee boat, I pray I'll find some of my wife's relatives aboard."

Also operating out of Yokosuka is the combat stores ship *USS White Plains* (AFS 4), known throughout the Western Pacific as the Orient Express. If any unit is qualified to offer lessons in the rescue of boat people, it is *White Plains*. The ship claims nine different boat loads of refu-

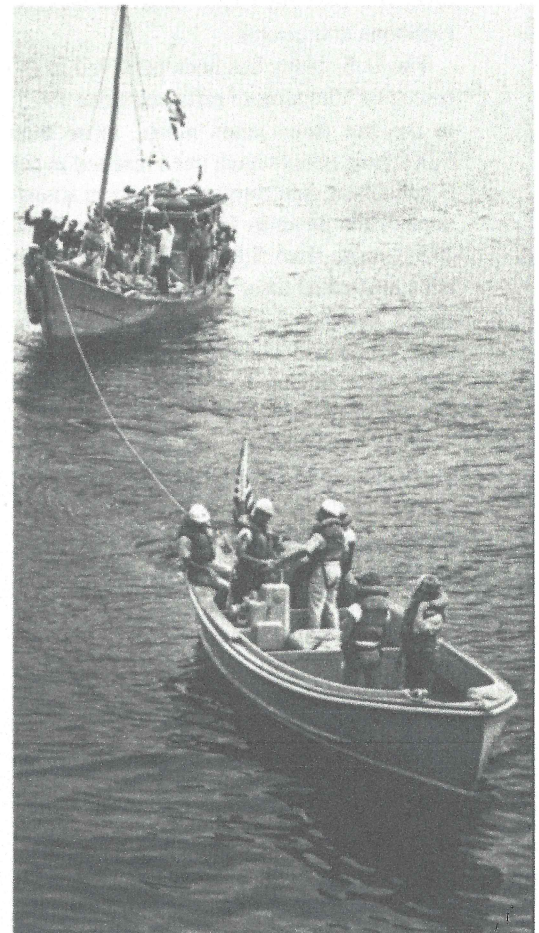
gees, saving 533 boat people from the sea.

Other ships have also had multiple rescues. Heading the list with five rescues each are the ammunition ship *USS Shasta* (AE 33) and the replenishment oiler *USS Wabash* (AOR 5). One hundred fifty-two refugees can testify to *Shasta's* motto of "We serve anytime, anywhere," while 190 others found refuge aboard *Wabash*. The *USS Elliot* (DD 967) and the tanker *USNS Sealift Antarctic* (T-AOT 176) have each

had four rescues. Those with three rescues each include the guided missile cruiser *USS Jouett* (CG 29), the destroyer *USS John Young* (DD 973), the frigate *USS Hepburn* (FF 1055) and the tank landing ship *USS Cayuga* (LST 1186).

Navy ships have not been alone in sighting refugees. P-3 *Orion* long-range patrol aircraft flying from the Naval Air Station, Cubi Point, R.P., have also encountered boat people. Locating a small 30-foot or 40-foot boat in a million square miles of ocean is a task of incredible proportions. "Mostly you have to visually locate the boats," said Commander Vincent P. Merz, former commanding officer of VP-22 at Cubi. "The refugee craft usually are small wooden boats with only 3 to 4 feet of free-

Women and children aboard one rescued boat huddle together while waiting to be taken aboard USS White Plains. Several refugee boats like the one rescued by USS Jouett (CG 29) were towed to safety by ships' motor whaleboats. Photo by JO3 Brian Finnerty.



board. That makes a difficult target for radar, especially if the seas are at all rough."

A boat usually appears as a tiny speck on the vast expanse of white-flecked blue water. As the plane nears and swoops lower, the boat takes shape and individual people can be seen. It is a frenzied scene on the deck as the boat people jump about their confined platform, waving flags, shirts, anything available. The scene in the aircraft is no less hectic as crewmen crowd

into the cockpit or at the plane's portholes for a glimpse of the boat.

Once a boat is located, the aircraft searches the surrounding sea. With luck, the crew can contact a Navy ship or merchant in the area that can make the rescue. Too often there is no luck, and the small boat must wait several days for a ship. When this is the case, the P-3 drops a buoy containing a radio transmitter. Usually there is someone in the boat with enough

basic English to answer radioed questions. But they usually respond with much more, and the crew will often hear a weak voice sobbing, "God bless you."

The Navy has become highly successful in rescuing refugees, but Seventh Fleet sailors are quick to point out there are no "easy" rescues. They are dealing with men, women and children who speak little or no English, who often have suffered hardship and degradation at the hands of pirates and who are usually experiencing various stages of dehydration, malnutrition, exposure and exhaustion. Transferring them from a small, bobbing wooden boat to a steel deck many feet above means literally carrying them aboard. It can be difficult under the best of circumstances, and is often compounded by darkness, rough seas, howling wind and driving rain.

The sheer numbers often seem overwhelming. The guided missile destroyer USS *Robison* (DDG 12) embarked 260 Vietnamese refugees in a single rescue, and the submarine USS *Barbel* (SS 580) encountered 87 boat people one night last year. *Barbel's* crew couldn't leave the people adrift, nor could they fit them all below decks. Morning light revealed a strange sight: There on the surface of the South China Sea lay a submarine with 87 refugees crowding its deck. An oiler arrived later to relieve *Barbel*.

More often than not, refugees are embarked with no more than the clothes on their backs. Finding clothing for the small-framed men, women and children is a challenge on an American fighting ship, but ships' crews are invariably enthusiastic in their generosity. T-shirts, dungarees, ball caps and shower shoes have become a sort of universal uniform for the boat people.

The ship's crew swings into a different kind of action when refugees are em-



The medical staff of USS Wabash (AOR 5) treats a Vietnamese refugee. Navy doctors and hospital corpsmen were instrumental in treating those rescued. Photo by PH3 Matthew Broadway.

Boat People



barked. The ship's master-at-arms force keeps the temporary visitors away from restricted or dangerous areas. Storekeepers scurry to locate soap, toothbrushes and toothpaste, and try to devise makeshift diapers. Corpsmen are busy conducting physical checkups on all the refugees. All of this activity is hindered by cramped spaces, intense emotion and a language barrier. But rescuers have their rewards, too.

The boat children are quick to adopt fā-



vorite sailors. From the saltiest to the youngest, American sailors respond easily to the open smiles and trusting stares of their tiny guests. The crew of the amphibious assault ship USS *Tarawa* (LHA 1) had an extra special guest: One of their refugees gave birth to a 6-pound, 11-ounce baby girl. The baby was delivered by Hospital Corpsman Second Class Richard E. Reed and was named Grace Tarawa Tran in honor of the ship.

"The assistance to the boat people has

really been a fleetwide response," said Vice Admiral S.R. Foley Jr., former Commander U.S. Seventh Fleet. "Few in the Seventh Fleet have not been involved, whether they are staff planners coordinating the operations, flight crews and ship-board lookouts scanning the waters of the South China Sea or the men who physically reach out to pull these desperate people to safety.

"I know these Seventh Fleet sailors share a special feeling," he added, "a

spirit that comes from being part of a life-saving effort. Their response to the plight of the refugees truly exemplifies a distinctly American brand of concern and compassion."

—Story by JOCS Tom Streeter

Once aboard Navy ships, Vietnamese refugees were transported either by helicopter or ship to processing camps like the one at the Subic Bay Naval Station in the Republic of the Philippines. Photos by PHC Ken George, GMGC Raymond Stewart and ICFN Bruce Coeegen.

