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Ronald B. Frankum, Jr. **Operation Passage to Freedom: The United States Navy in Vietnam, 1954-1955.** Lubbock, Texas: Texas Tech University Press, 2007. ISBN-10: 0-89672-608-8. 21 illustrations. 3 maps. 9 tables. 3 Appendixes. Notes. Index. Bibliography. xxvi + 254 pages.

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The U.S. Navy has participated in a variety of humanitarian operations during its history. Many have been small-scale affairs, but others involved significant resources. In 1921, for example, seven U.S. Navy destroyers supported an American Relief Administration (ARA) effort to deliver \$63 million of food aid to Russia. During the Greco-Turkish War in 1922, U.S. sailors, along with ARA and Red Cross personnel, helped care for some of the 250,000 Greek civilians trapped at Smyrna until an the evacuation could be organized.<sup>1</sup> More recently, 12,600 U.S. military personnel (mostly from the U.S. Navy) and two aircraft carriers participated in relief efforts in Indonesia following the December 2004 Tsunami.<sup>2</sup>

As these efforts reveal, humanitarian operations represent a significant aspect of the U.S. Navy's history, and yet, until very recently, naval historians have tended to ignore these types of missions in favor of combat operations. Ronald B. Frankum, Jr.'s *Operation Passage to Freedom* therefore is a welcomed addition to naval literature. During the 1954-55 Passage to Freedom operation, U.S. Navy vessels moved 293,002 Vietnamese refugees from the Democratic Republic of Vietnam to the Republic of Vietnam. They also evacuated 14,868 Vietnamese and 2,978 French military personnel and moved thousands of tons of military equipment to South Vietnam.

The significance of the event was three-fold. It provided a tangible propaganda coup for the United States—the image of American sailors helping thousands of refugees to flee Communism. These refugees, approximately one third of whom were Catholic, in turn helped enlarge President Ngo Dinh Diem's political base in the south. Finally, Passage to Freedom ships prevented thousands of tons of military equipment, most of which had been donated to the French by the United States, from falling into Viet Minh hands. This equipment, along with the Vietnamese soldiers evacuated from North Vietnam, would form the nucleus of the new Armed Forces of the Republic of Vietnam.

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<sup>1</sup> Sarandis Papadopoulos, "From the Barbary Wars to Kosovo: Significant Aspects of the U.S. Navy Forward Presence in Europe and the Mediterranean," 10-19.

<sup>2</sup> For more on the roll of the Navy in the Tsunami disaster, see Bruce A. Elleman, *Waves of Hope: The U.S. Navy's Response to the Tsunami in Northern Indonesia* (Newport, RI: Naval War College Press, 2007).

Using official Navy records as well as oral histories conducted with surviving crew members, Ronald B. Frankum, Jr., an assistant professor of history at Millersville University of Pennsylvania, examines Passage to Freedom in exhaustive detail. He explains the logistical challenges confronted by the Navy in moving masses of civilians, many of whom were elderly, disabled, sick, or pregnant, from the Red River Delta to the Mekong Delta. He also examines the role of the Navy and other groups in establishing debarkation camps near Haiphong and reception camps in South Vietnam.

Disease was one of the biggest challenges confronted by the Navy during Passage to Freedom and the author reveals how Navy medical personnel treated everything from typhoid fever to dysentery during the affair. In August 1954, the *Algol* (AKA-54) reported two cases of measles, two cases of typhoid, thirty-one cases of dysentery, fifty-seven cases of conjunctivitis, six cases of pneumonia, five cases of impetigo, ten cases of tuberculosis, and twelve cases of influenza amongst one compliment of refugees transported south (p. 90). Infectious disease not only proved a threat to the health of the refugees but also to the Navy crews. On 27 August 1954, *Bayfield* (APA-33) reported eight serious and fifty simple cases of diarrhea among the ship's enlisted personnel (p. 90).

Another operational challenge involved moving masses of people who did not speak a common language. Sailors, however, soon learned that sign language and general good will could help bridge the language gap: gifts of candy to small children went a long way towards easing the fear many refugees might have had of Navy personnel. Roman Catholic priests also served as effective intermediaries by acting as translators and "shepherding their flocks" during the voyage (p. 72). Not all Catholic priests, though, were cooperative. Frankum notes that they occasionally "balked" at resettlement options (p. 147). USNS *Beauregard* "reported that the Vietnamese priests did not assist in the organization of the civilians; they slept most of the time." (p. 121)

*Passage to Freedom* is more of a narrative history than a thesis-driven, academic monograph. The author attempts to argue that the experience created a moral obligation to the Vietnamese people, which ultimately helped the United States broaden the war. However, Frankum's focus on the numerous details of the operation rather than the larger, political and military relationship between the two countries makes it difficult for him to connect the dots with this thesis. This descriptive approach will please some naval historians, who yearn for a precise outline of the role of the Navy in the event, but it often makes for rather staid reading. Chapter 3's eighteen page account of the operational order for Passage to Freedom (Operation Order 2-54) stands out as an example of the type of laborious detail that might have been edited out of the manuscript.

Along these same lines, the narrative lacks *dramatis personae*. While the author does employ bits and pieces of oral history to illustrate key themes, he never delves very deeply into the personalities of his actors. Except for some detailed information on rear Admiral Lorenzo Sabin, the commander of the Passage to Freedom task force (TF-90), there are virtually no biographical vignettes in the book. The author might have livened up his narrative by delving deeper into the individual stories of the sailors he interviewed. Also, the book completely glosses over the story of Lieutenant Thomas Dooley, USN, a Navy doctor who worked with refugees at Haiphong and one of the most colorful characters of the event. Dooley's subsequent book about his

experiences, *Deliver Us from Evil: The Story of Viet Nam's Flight to Freedom*, would come to dominate the American memory of Passage to Freedom for many years to come.<sup>3</sup>

These minor shortcomings aside, *Passage to Freedom* is the definitive account of this chapter of the U.S. Navy's history. It is based on a comprehensive evaluation of the Navy's records of the event combined with over forty author interviews. Historians of the Vietnam War and humanitarian maritime operations will find a wealth of information about one of the U.S. Navy's most significant humanitarian operations.



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<sup>3</sup> Thomas A. Dooley, *Deliver Us From Evil: The Story of Viet Nam's Flight to Freedom* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy), viii.