

Last Ship From Da Nang

The Terrible Voyage

The Pioneer Contender, a U.S. cargo ship, made two trips to remove about 12,000 people crowded onto the barges of Da Nang harbor as the city fell to the Viet Cong. Correspondent Peter O'Laughlin sailed on the Contender's last voyage.

★ ★ ★

By Peter O'Laughlin
Associated Press

Aboard the Pioneer Contender

South Vietnamese marines shot to death about 25 people they claimed were Viet Cong suspects on an American ship evacuating refugees from Da Nang, crew members reported.

Many others drowned or died of exposure trying to escape.

Children lost their footing or were knocked over the side of heaving barges. Some mothers leaped after them and were lost. Bloating bodies floated in the harbor.

Marauding South Vietnamese troops fought sea battles to take over lighters and get aboard barges to reach the Pioneer Contender and its sister ship the Pioneer Commander as South Vietnam's second-largest city fell to the Viet Cong over Easter weekend. The mass killing was reported to have taken place on the fan-tail of the Pioneer Commander.

Two Vietnamese men also were shot to death aboard the Contender, and a woman

One Refugee Left Holding the Bag

Saigon

Somewhere on the South China sea there's a happy refugee.

He is the person who took hold of a bag passed up to him on the United States merchant ship Miller at Da Nang over the weekend by a U.S. consulate official.

was wounded by unknown assailants.

The Contender was the last ship to carry out a load of people Sunday before Communist shelling forced a halt to the rescue.

The ship's seamen turned away as a tug pulled one barge in close with its suffering cargo. The smell of urine, sweat and rot swept the Contender.

Perhaps 4000 people were jammed into the barge, about 200 feet long and 80 feet wide. Wet from rain, scorched by sun, they had been without food and toilet facilities for four days.

Two Americans of unknown affiliation stood guard over the barge. It also contained hundreds of armed rebellious South Vietnamese troops and, so they said, some Viet Cong infiltrators.

In the bag was one million piastres (nearly \$1500 the Quaker Society had asked the official to bring safely to Saigon.

In the confusion, the official never saw the bag or the refugee again, an American source said.

Agence France-Presse

One of the guards, a burly blond in rimless glasses, sat on top of the 12-foot fence encircling the barge. He nonchalantly chewed a cigar and nursed a submachine gun.

On the bridge of the Pioneer Contender, the radio crackled.

"Contender, this is Pioneer Commander. We've had a report that underwater sappers are on their way out. You'll have to keep moving. We're loading but it's a mess."

Captain Edward C. Flink of Massapequa, N.Y., a 200-pound master mariner, reached for the mike.

"Yeah," he drawled. "We had it yesterday, Contender standing by."

Chief mate Robert Holock, 30, of Fairfax, Calif., in hard hat and oil-stained overalls, was organizing the lines and hawsers to se-

cure the barge alongside, a tricky job in the wind and rain.

On the first trip out of Da Nang there had been some U.S. Marine guards from the evacuated consulate to help keep order. They had driven panic-stricken people back, fired shots over their heads and searched soldiers for weapons. Now there were only the 44 officers and crew of the ship.

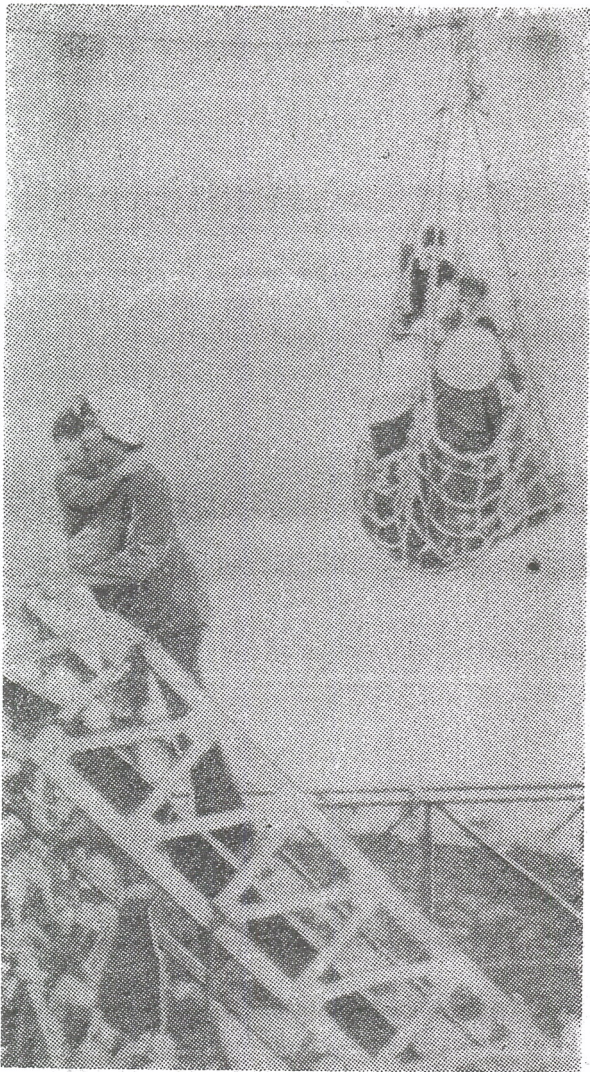
A rickety gangway about 50 feet long, dropping at a 45-degree-angle from the ship's side to the barge, was slung into place by the cargo boom. The rush began.

A seaman positioned himself at the top of the ladder and began hauling children and infants aboard as their mothers scrambled for a foothold. He handed the youngsters to shipmates on deck.

The bosun worked the controls of the cargo boom. He dropped the cargo net into the barge and hoisted loads of women and children over the ship's side and into the hold like cattle.

Purser Clifford R. Rogero, 61, of Jacksonville, Fla., who signaled the bosun when to hoist the net, was cursing, pushing and shoving people out of the way so they would not be hit by the swinging cargo net.

Wails, shouts, the cries of children, pleas for water, food, a doctor filled the air. A woman in the hold held up a dead baby. She was hoisted back to the barge so she



AP Wirephoto

REFUGEES WERE LOADED LIKE CARGO A father also raced up the gangplank

could leave the body there. It seemed better than dropping the body over the side.

Half an hour after loading started, a woman gave birth in the hold. She brought the baby in a peasant's traditional conical Vietnamese straw hat to Rogero, who took it to the sick bay, washed it and, as he put it, "Got it going."

At least four more babies were born during the night and the rest of the 17-hour voyage to Cam Ranh Bay. Probably twice as many died and were slipped over

the side with their mother's tears for a requiem.

In the lower deck, the crew's cabins and companionways were turned into a hospital.

One beautiful little girl, white-faced and unconscious, her breath coming shallowly, lay on the bunk of electrician Philip J. Goodson, 35, of Manville, N.J.

"She's suffering from exposure. I gave her some sugar and water," he said. "She's a lot better now. Don't you think she's a lot better now?"

She died in the night.

A Vietnamese army doctor, who came aboard from a barge in pressed uniform and polished shoes, tended the sick in his undershorts. Sweat streamed down his cheeks and fogged his glasses.

The crew, against orders, raided the pantry. They boiled two buckets of eggs and gave them, with their milk ration, to the sick children.

But the Pioneer Contender, two months out from the West Coast, had barely enough supplies for the crew, let alone enough to feed thousands of refugees.

A second barge pulled alongside with about 3000 armed soldiers and their families. Soldiers kicked and punched their way to the gangway, which was rising and falling in the swell.

As the second barge emptied, the tug Asiatic Stamina pulled up, letting off three Americans and three Vietnamese, the last known people to get out of Da Nang.

The barge was set adrift. Among the abandoned television sets, bicycles and suitcases lay the bodies of three children.