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Captain of Refugee Vessel Says Thousands Left Behind

From News Dispatches

AGANA, Guam, May 6—The captain of a ship that brought 5,030 Vietnam refugees to Guam tonight said thousands of persons were left behind in boats in the waters off Saigon "howling and crying, 'Come back!'"

Meanwhile, the last U.S. warship to leave Vietnamese waters docked at Subic Bay in the Philippines Tuesday with 177 refugees aboard.

Arthur Boucher, captain of the cargo ship American Challenger that docked here today, described the scene off Vungtau in South Vietnamese waters as he picked up refugees there 10 days ago.

"There were people afloat in boats. They were scrambling to get on the ship," he said. "At Phuquoc (island) there were 30,000 to 50,000."

At the beach resort of Longhai, he said, he saw 4,000 to 6,000 would-be refugees wailing and pleading from the shore. "But we had to go," he said. "Our orders were to take only 2,500 people from that area and we already had our quota."

Boucher said one of his companion ships, the Pioneer Contender, became so overloaded with nearly 16,000 people that at least 600 jumped overboard to escape the crush.

"I counted at least 200 people in the water swimming for the shore at one time," he said.

"It was very sad,"

Boucher said. "Families were being broken up. Some were on the ship and their families were in small boats and were left behind . . . We left several crafts behind. There must have been 500 boats adrift."

The 19,000-ton ship was the first of three U.S. Navy charter vessels expected to land a total of 18,000 refugees from South Vietnam on Guam.

The ship was preceded to the dock by a powerful odor of unwashed people mixed with the stench of outdoor toilets that had been rigged up on the decks.

Although some earlier evacuees from Vietnam have been wealthy, the poverty of those landing today was obvious. Most were barefoot, poorly dressed and carried few possessions.

Richardo Bordallo, the governor of Guam, who came to the dock to greet the refugees, commented: "It reminds me of when we came out of the jungles after the Japanese occupation that ended in 1944."

Boucher said that at one point his ship carried 9,000 Vietnamese crammed together so tightly that thousands had to be transferred to other ships en route.

Three infants died, apparently of dehydration, aboard the ship.

"We must have had a half dozen births of children on the ship," said the captain.

He said one infant was born a few hours before the ship docked at this island U.S. territory.

Thousands of haggard, barefoot refugees—some in black pajamas, others with their clothes soiled and in tatters—streamed off the ship.

"They said the trip was terrible," said an interpreter working on the pier. Very few of the refugees spoke English, contrasting with previous arrivals of refugees many of whom spoke English fluently.

The first refugee off the boat was carried down in a litter, suffering from appendicitis. Several aged refugees moved through the processing in wheel chairs.

The guided missile destroyer USS Benjamin Stoddert, part of a U.S. 7th Fleet flotilla that evacuated South Vietnamese refugees, steamed into Subic Bay northwest of Manila Tuesday with 177 refugees.

Among the refugees aboard the destroyer were remnants of a South Vietnamese navy gunboat whose crewmen had staged a mutiny before the Stoddert arrived.

The Stoddert had completed its mission and had been sailing to Manila when it was ordered to "make one last sweep of the evacuation area" off Vietnam, said Cmdr. Peter Hekman, the vessel's commanding officer.