

# The Royal Navy's Vietnam War: H.M.S. *Warrior* and the evacuation of refugees from North Vietnam, September 1954\*

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## Abstract

This article examines H.M.S. *Warrior*'s role in transporting several thousand refugees from North to South Vietnam, which was part of a much larger evacuation of people that followed the Geneva Conference of 1954 and the partition of Vietnam at the seventeenth parallel. Although *Warrior* only moved a relatively small number of Vietnamese, the story of the ship's involvement in this episode offers not only a birds-eye view of the refugee exodus but also an insight into Britain's broader diplomatic interests in South East Asia. Drawing on archival records and oral interviews, the article explores events from the perspective of both the policy makers who sent *Warrior* to Indochina and the sailors who participated in the mission.

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When H.M.S. *Warrior* left the island of Malta in mid April 1954, it was bound for troubled waters. One of the Royal Navy's Colossus-class carriers, the mainstays of the British fleet in the first post-war decade, its mission was to join the United Nations' forces monitoring the ceasefire on the Korean peninsula.<sup>1</sup> Korea was not the only Cold War flashpoint in Asia, however. As *Warrior* headed eastwards, another major conflagration in the region was just reaching its climax. In Indochina, Ho Chi Minh's communist-led forces were on the verge of finishing off the beleaguered garrison at Dien Bien Phu and, with it, France's South-East Asian empire. Desperate to prevent a communist victory, the administration of Dwight D. Eisenhower sought to persuade the British government to participate in military operations to shore up the French position in Indochina. Indeed, on 24 April, as *Warrior* reached the southern end of the Red Sea, Washington pressed London to contribute land-based aircraft and, if possible, an aircraft carrier to 'united action' against the Vietnamese communists. The British were aghast, not least because they feared such an escalation of the conflict might precipitate a third world war.<sup>2</sup> By the time *Warrior* arrived in Asian waters in

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<sup>1</sup> For a history of the Colossus-class carriers, see N. McCart, *The Colossus-Class Aircraft Carrier, 1944–72* (Cheltenham, 2002). *Warrior*'s movements in the spring of 1954 are described on p. 173.

<sup>2</sup> For the 24 Apr. encounter, see A. Eden, *Full Circle: the Memoirs of Anthony Eden* (Cambridge, Mass., 1960), pp. 114–15; and E. Shuckburgh, *Descent to Suez: Diaries 1951–6* (New York, 1987), pp. 171–3. For the broad thrust of British policy and the response to 'united action', see K. Ruane, "'Containing America": aspects of British foreign policy and the Cold War in South-East Asia, 1951–4', *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, vii (1996), 141–74; and G. Warner, 'The settlement of the Indochina war', in *The Foreign Policy of Churchill's Peacetime Administration, 1951–5*, ed. J. W. Young (Leicester, 1988), pp. 233–58. There has been a lively debate over the

mid May, Britain's refusal to join in 'united action' had helped to scupper plans for military intervention and refocused attention on diplomatic efforts to resolve the crisis. Instead of launching armed sorties from the Gulf of Tonkin, *Warrior* played a rather different role in the Indochina debacle – helping to implement a peace agreement that emerged from the shores of Lake Geneva.

On 20–21 July 1954, after more than two months of diplomatic sparring, the participants at the Geneva Conference proposed a series of measures to bring the eight-year war in Indochina to an end. In Vietnam's case, the settlement provided for a cessation of hostilities and required the opposing forces to regroup either side of a line that would temporarily partition the country at the seventeenth parallel, with the French to concentrate in the south and the Vietnamese communists in the north. Reunification, and a final resolution of Vietnam's political future, would be left to elections scheduled to be held no later than July 1956. Besides the regrouping of military forces, the ceasefire agreement also permitted the free movement of civilians across the partition line for a period of up to 300 days.<sup>3</sup> This latter clause encouraged hundreds of thousands of people to flee southwards across the seventeenth parallel to avoid coming under the control of Ho Chi Minh's Democratic Republic of Vietnam (D.R.V.).

There were several groups in the north that had good reason to view a D.R.V. takeover with trepidation and seek sanctuary in the south: the well-to-do because of their status as 'class enemies'; civil servants as a result of their association with the colonial power; and the Catholic population, which was deeply anti-communist and the target of political and religious persecution. Thus, between July 1954 and May 1955, about 900,000 refugees fled the north for the south, the majority by sea.<sup>4</sup> While the French and American navies transported most of them, H.M.S. *Warrior* played a small part in this mass exodus. In September 1954, the carrier moved over 3,000 people in two trips between the port of Haiphong and the mouth of the Saigon River delta at Cap St. Jacques (Vung Tau).

This episode is of interest for several reasons. First, although *Warrior* evacuated a relatively modest number of Vietnamese, its mission was diplomatically significant; it was an expression of Britain's interest in upholding the agreements made at the Geneva Conference and keeping the peace in Indochina. As historian Arthur Combs has argued, the British government, unlike its American counterpart, embraced the 1954 settlement as the best of a series of bad options.<sup>5</sup> The Geneva accords solved a terrible dilemma for the British; the choice between accepting communist domination of the whole of Vietnam or risking a dangerous escalation of the Indochina conflict through some kind of 'united action'. Under the circumstances, losing northern Vietnam to Ho Chi Minh, and postponing the thorny question of reunification for

question of whether the Eisenhower administration really intended to intervene militarily (see G. C. Herring and R. H. Immerman, 'Eisenhower, Dulles, and Dienbienphu: "The Day We Didn't Go to War" revisited', *Jour. Amer. Hist.*, lxxi (1984), 343–63; and M. Billings-Yun, *Decision Against War: Eisenhower and Dien Bien Phu, 1954* (New York, 1988)).

<sup>3</sup> For the Geneva Agreements and the conference's 'Final Declaration', see *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952–4*, xvi: *the Geneva Conference* (Washington, D.C., 1981), pp. 1505–42 (for Article 14d on the free movement of civilians, see p. 1509).

<sup>4</sup> L. A. Wiesner, *Victims and Survivors: Displaced Persons and other War Victims in Viet-Nam, 1954–75* (New York, 1988), pp. 7–9.

<sup>5</sup> A. Combs, 'The path not taken: the British alternative to U.S. policy in Vietnam, 1954–6', *Diplomatic Hist.*, xix (1995), 33–57.

another two years, represented an acceptable compromise. Anthony Eden, the foreign secretary, had co-chaired the conference with the Soviets and worked assiduously to overcome the numerous obstacles to a settlement, including the ‘elephantine obstinacy’<sup>6</sup> of John Foster Dulles, the U.S. secretary of state, who feared a sell-out to the communists. ‘Without persistent British efforts’, wrote James Cable, a junior foreign office official in 1954, ‘the Geneva Conference would never have been held, allowed to continue or permitted to end in even the limited measure of agreement actually achieved’.<sup>7</sup> Not surprisingly, as Combs noted, Eden harboured ‘strong proprietary feelings’ towards the accords and the outcome of events in post-Geneva Indochina.<sup>8</sup> *Warrior’s* role in the refugee evacuation must be seen in this context. As a review of the documentary record reveals, its participation was an act of ‘naval diplomacy’ and symbol of Britain’s commitment to the implementation of the conference agreements.

As well as shedding light on ‘high politics’, the story of *Warrior’s* mission also allows us to look at this episode from the point of view of those refugees and sailors caught up in the events of September 1954. This perspective offers a ‘bottom up’ view of the exodus. The mass movement of refugees was a dramatic event – and a traumatic one for those who fled their homes in the wake of Vietnam’s partition – but it has not received much attention from historians. The most vivid descriptions of the refugee flight come from contemporary American accounts, most famously the writings of Tom Dooley who served as a U.S. Navy doctor during the evacuation. Dooley is not always an entirely credible witness, however, and the title of his book, *Deliver us from Evil*, epitomizes the virulent anti-communism and propagandistic tenor of much of the existing commentary on the exodus.<sup>9</sup> This article offers a somewhat different perspective: the story of one ship’s involvement in the evacuation – a British one at that – and an account tempered by time and distance from the events of 1954. Since it would be a most difficult task to track down the surviving Vietnamese transported by *Warrior*, the author relied on interviews and correspondence with former members of the carrier’s crew to assist in reconstructing this ‘history from below’. Their testimony helps us to appreciate what the exodus meant for those involved, refugees and sailors alike.

The refugee problem that eventually brought H.M.S. *Warrior* to Indochina had begun to develop even before the end of the Geneva Conference. While attention in the spring of 1954 remained riveted on the isolated French outpost at Dien Bien Phu, the scope and tempo of the fighting had intensified in the Red River delta, the rice-producing heart of northern Vietnam and home to a densely concentrated population of eight million people. With large parts of the countryside turned into a battleground, only the delta’s urban centres offered an escape from the war’s depredations for many rural inhabitants. In late April, Arthur Y. Fish, the British consul in Hanoi, reported that ‘the former trickle into [the city] of refugees from the Delta villages seems to be broadening now into a steady stream’. He noted that about 6,000 evacuees had

<sup>6</sup> H. Macmillan, *Tides of Fortune, 1945–55* (New York, 1969), p. 499.

<sup>7</sup> J. Cable, *The Geneva Conference of 1954 on Indochina* (New York, 1986), p. 2. For Eden’s diplomatic skills and performance at Geneva, see Shuckburgh, p. 15.

<sup>8</sup> Combs, p. 36.

<sup>9</sup> T. A. Dooley, ‘Deliver us from evil’, in *Dr. Tom Dooley’s Three Great Books* (New York, 1960), pp. 7–122. For an analysis of Dooley and the temper of the times, see S. Jacobs, *America’s Miracle Man in Vietnam: Ngo Dinh Diem, Religion, Race, and U.S. Intervention in Southeast Asia, 1950–7* (Durham, N.C., 2004), pp. 127–62.

recently taken up residence in and around the colonial capital. For many, this move was probably dictated by an instinct for survival rather than by a political affinity for one side or the other. 'The sad truth is that throughout the greater part of the Delta, the villagers are terrified of soldiers of any kind', Fish observed.<sup>10</sup> There were some early signs of the impending exodus southwards, however, especially among those who had the means to organize their own escape. Fearful of a communist takeover, well-to-do Vietnamese in Hanoi were already selling their property and moving to Saigon.<sup>11</sup>

The influx of people into the relative sanctuary of Hanoi and other delta cities soon turned into something of a flood. Following their defeat at Dien Bien Phu – the 'Stalingrad of [the] Indochina war', as one U.S. official put it<sup>12</sup> – the French sought to shorten their military lines in the delta and concentrate on the defence of the 'Hanoi-Haiphong axis'. In late June, as part of this regroupment, their forces began to abandon outlying areas of the old defensive perimeter, including the southern delta zones of Phat Diem and Bui Chu that were home to thousands of staunchly anti-communist Vietnamese Catholics.<sup>13</sup> According to France's prime minister, Pierre Mendès-France, French troops offered transportation to local inhabitants who wished to leave these zones and 'a fairly substantial number of people had availed themselves of this opportunity'. U.S. reports suggested that some 30,000 people fled the evacuated areas.<sup>14</sup> It was in the wake of the French withdrawal from the southern delta that Ngo Dinh Diem, premier-designate of the Associated State of Vietnam, first broached with American officials the possibility of U.S. support for a mass evacuation to the south if France negotiated a 'capitulatory peace' that left the northern half of the country in communist hands.<sup>15</sup>

When the outcome of the Geneva Conference confirmed his worst fears about partition, Diem made such an evacuation his top priority. On 23 July, two days after the ceasefire agreement, he told Donald Heath, the U.S. ambassador in Saigon, that he believed '1 million, perhaps even 2 million' northerners might wish to move south, but argued that neither his own government nor the French could manage an operation of that size.<sup>16</sup> Several months before the Geneva Agreements, the French had drawn up contingency plans for an emergency withdrawal from Hanoi; however, the scheme only provided for the movement of 28,000 civilians – 10,000 French subjects and 18,000 Vietnamese whose collaboration with the colonial power might put them in danger if the communists took over.<sup>17</sup> Following the Geneva settlement,

<sup>10</sup> The National Archives of the U.K.: Public Record Office, FO 371/112025, DF 1015/58, Hanoi to Saigon, 21 Apr. 1954.

<sup>11</sup> T.N.A.: P.R.O., FO 371/112025, DF 1015/64, Hanoi to Saigon, 15 May 1954; FO 371/112026, DF 1015/101, Hanoi to Saigon, 20 July 1954.

<sup>12</sup> Saigon to State, 24 June 1954 (*Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952-4*, xiii: *Indochina*, pt. 2 (Washington, D.C., 1982) (hereafter *FR.U.S.*, xiii, pt. 2), p. 1735).

<sup>13</sup> Paris to State, 10 May 1954 (*FR.U.S.*, xiii, pt. 2, pp. 1523-4); Paris to State, 30 May 1954 (*FR.U.S.*, xiii, pt. 2, pp. 1637-8); Hanoi to State, 30 June 1954 (*FR.U.S.*, xiii, pt. 2, pp. 1765-6).

<sup>14</sup> Paris to State, 2 July 1954 (*FR.U.S.*, xiii, pt. 2, p. 1777); U.S. National Archives (hereafter U.S.N.A.), Record Group 469, Mission to Vietnam, Resettlement and Rehabilitation Division, Field Service Classified Subject Files, 1954-8 (box 1), 'Poindexter's notes on the Hanoi-Haiphong trip', 14 July 1954, and Adler to chief, community development division, 14 Aug. 1954.

<sup>15</sup> Saigon to State, 29 June 1954 (*FR.U.S.*, xiii, pt. 2, pp. 1762-3).

<sup>16</sup> Saigon to State, 23 July 1954 (*FR.U.S.*, xiii, pt. 2, pp. 1872-3).

<sup>17</sup> A. L. Nutt, 'Regroupment, withdrawals, and transfers – Vietnam: 1954-5', at <[http://rand.org/pubs/research\\_memoranda/RM6163](http://rand.org/pubs/research_memoranda/RM6163)> [accessed 21 July 2008], pt. 1, p. 50.

the number of potential refugees dwarfed such figures. By early August, Diem estimated that there were 70,000 evacuees in the Hanoi area alone and thousands more streaming into the city of Haiphong. These numbers, moreover, did not include the existing residents of those northern towns and cities still controlled by the French, who might also choose to seek refuge in the south. Although the French had begun to transport some refugees to Saigon, by both sea and air, they simply did not have the capability to move the tens of thousands already wanting to leave.<sup>18</sup>

Conditions in Haiphong, the main port of embarkation, deteriorated rapidly and soon became a major source of concern. Nguyen Y Duc, a teenage evacuee at the time, described the situation as ‘chaotic’, with little or no provision made for the incoming refugees.<sup>19</sup> In fact, the influx of people into the evacuation zone, on top of the city’s already swollen wartime population, had all but overwhelmed the local authorities. Refugees ‘sprawled in the streets, gutters and alleys’, Tom Dooley recalled, ‘and covered the parks like swarming ant-heaps’.<sup>20</sup> Rex V. Johnston-Smith of the British consulate discussed the growing crisis with a former mayor of Haiphong, who blamed the confusion and lack of provision on the ‘complete breakdown of civil administration’ in northern Vietnam. The ensuing mess ‘had resulted in untold misery and distress amongst refugees awaiting evacuation’ and conditions ‘where old and very young were likely to die from want [or] exposure’.<sup>21</sup> Under the circumstances, Diem feared that any delay in moving people southwards would provide the communists with a perfect propaganda theme, one that they could employ to dissuade other would-be refugees from leaving their homes for the squalor and chaos of the evacuation areas.<sup>22</sup>

Ho Chi Minh and his senior colleagues were certainly anxious to staunch the flow of refugees. Since they claimed to represent the interests of the entire nation, the exodus was a political embarrassment. It also threatened to complicate the process of reunifying the country under their leadership. The flight of so many people – including intellectuals and civil servants – would hamper the consolidation of D.R.V. control in the north while providing a boon to Diem’s fledgling regime in the south. The last thing Ho wished to see was the emergence of a robust government below the seventeenth parallel, one that might make the elections scheduled for 1956 into a real contest, or refuse to hold them at all and thereby turn the Geneva division of the country into a permanent split.<sup>23</sup> Thus, the communists made strenuous efforts to persuade people to remain in the north. They attempted to reassure the urban middle classes that they would not seize private property or punish civil servants ‘duped’ or ‘coerced’ into working for the *ancien regime*; they also sought to calm the fears of the

<sup>18</sup> T.N.A.: P.R.O., FO 959/143, Hanoi to Saigon, 4 Aug. 1954; Saigon to State, 5 Aug. 1954 (*FR.U.S.*, xiii, pt. 2, pp. 1921–2).

<sup>19</sup> Nguyen Y Duc interview, 18 March 2005.

<sup>20</sup> Dooley, ‘Deliver us from evil’, p. 43.

<sup>21</sup> T.N.A.: P.R.O., FO 959/143, Hanoi to Saigon, 13 Aug. 1954.

<sup>22</sup> T.N.A.: P.R.O., FO 959/143, Hanoi to Saigon, 4 Aug. 1954; Saigon to State, 5 Aug. 1954 (*FR.U.S.*, xiii, pt. 2, pp. 1921–2).

<sup>23</sup> ‘Chi thi cua Ban Bi Thu [Instructions from the secretariat]’, 5 Sept. 1954 (Dang Cong San Viet Nam [Vietnamese Communist party], *Van Kien Dang, Toan Tap* [*Complete Party Documents*], xv: 1954 (Hanoi, 2001) (hereafter *Complete Party Documents*, xv), pp. 263–4; ‘Chi thi cua Bo Chinh Tri [Instructions from the politburo]’, 6 Sept. 1954 (*Complete Party Documents*, xv. 273–5). See also Nutt, p. 107; W. J. Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh* (New York, 2000), pp. 465–8.

Catholic population by emphasizing their respect for freedom of religion.<sup>24</sup> In addition, the U.S. embassy reported that they used other measures, including ‘terrorism’, to stop people from leaving. Nguyen Y Duc witnessed some of these tactics during a train trip with other refugees from Hai Duong to Haiphong in the autumn of 1954. At every stop along the way, he noted, communist cadres boarded the train to cajole and harangue the passengers, and they became increasingly agitated and abusive as they failed to win people over.<sup>25</sup>

With the communists seeking to retard the flow of refugees, Diem viewed the exodus from the north as a race against time. Consequently, to secure the necessary support for the movement of the huge number of people that he hoped would choose to leave, he sought to internationalize the evacuation effort. Having pressed the Eisenhower administration on a number of occasions for its support, Diem’s persistence was rewarded in early August by the promise of U.S. assistance.<sup>26</sup> He asked for British aid too. On 4 August, Diem told the consulate’s Andrew Kettles that he wanted Britain to provide transport aircraft to speed up the evacuation. Over the next couple of days, several other Vietnamese officials tackled Kettles on the subject of assistance for an air- or sealift, expressing the hope that, after all of Anthony Eden’s efforts at Geneva, ‘Great Britain would not lose interest in the fate of the Vietnamese people’. The British diplomat responded to the requests ‘with pious platitudes’, but cabled Sir Hubert Graves, the British minister in Saigon, to report this sudden barrage. ‘Since this is the third time within a few days that I have been approached in this matter’, Kettles remarked, ‘I shall be grateful for your guidance’.<sup>27</sup>

Graves needed little prompting; he was anxious that Britain should continue to ‘show the flag’ following its role in promoting the settlement at Geneva. On 22 July, the day after the conference’s conclusion, he had identified the plight of northern refugees as the ‘immediate task’ in Vietnam and proposed to the foreign office that Britain offer a ‘substantial relief grant’ for prefabricated housing and construction equipment to assist with their resettlement in the south. Complimenting the foreign secretary on the ‘notable achievement of Geneva’, Graves told Eden that he felt sure such material assistance would ‘reap a plentiful harvest of goodwill – a sentiment of importance when the markets of this country begin to develop’.<sup>28</sup> When the Vietnamese began to press for help in actually moving people southwards, Graves was quick to champion that cause as well.

Diem met with the British minister on 10 August and formally requested Her Majesty’s government’s assistance in transporting refugees, preferably by air. In reporting this conversation to London, Graves made two points: first, that the lack of adequate transportation had created a bottleneck at embarkation points in the north, which slowed the evacuation and deterred potential refugees in outlying areas from leaving their homes; and second, that Diem’s government faced enormous problems in establishing its authority in the south and needed some morale-boosting proof of

<sup>24</sup> ‘Chi thi cua Ban Bi Thu [Instructions from the secretariat]’, 3 July 1954 (*Complete Party Documents*, xv. 145–50); ‘Chi thi cua Ban Bi Thu [Instructions from the secretariat]’, 30 July 1954 (*Complete Party Documents*, xv. 248–9).

<sup>25</sup> Saigon to State, 5 Aug. 1954 (*FR.U.S.*, xiii, pt. 2, pp. 1921–2); Duc interview, 18 March 2005. For a critical summary of the D.R.V.’s implementation of the Geneva Conference’s clause on freedom of movement, see *Fourth Interim Report of the International Commission for Supervision and Control in Vietnam, 11th Apr., 1955 to 10th Aug. 1955* (Parl. Papers 1955 [Cmd. 9654], xlv), pp. 19–24.

<sup>26</sup> Editorial note, *FR.U.S.*, xiii, pt. 2, p. 1922; State to Saigon, 7 Aug. 1954 (*FR.U.S.*, xiii, pt. 2, pp. 1924–5).

<sup>27</sup> T.N.A.: P.R.O., FO 959/143, Hanoi to Saigon, 4, 6 Aug. 1954.

<sup>28</sup> T.N.A.: P.R.O., FO 371/112109, DF 1093/18, Saigon to foreign office, 22 July 1954.

international concern for its survival. Finding aircraft to transport people ‘would probably be very difficult’, he noted, but if ‘we could send one or two ships to get people away from Haiphong we should be doing something useful’. Over the next few days, Graves sent two further messages to London in which he underlined the importance of helping the Vietnamese and asked for a decision on the issue ‘without delay’.<sup>29</sup>

Foreign office officials shared this interest in meeting Diem’s request for assistance. Their chief concern in doing so was the preservation of the peace process begun at Geneva. With its rather convoluted timetable – from the phased regroupment of the opposing forces to the elections scheduled for 1956 – the Geneva settlement was obviously a work in progress. As Eden observed, ‘this achievement was well worth while’ but its success ‘now depended on the spirit in which the agreements were carried out’.<sup>30</sup> London hoped all participants would honour that spirit. Otherwise, the British feared they would face the same dilemma that the conference had allowed them to sidestep; if the Geneva accords broke down, the resumption of hostilities in Indochina would likely result in either the rapid extension of communist control over the whole of Vietnam or a dramatic escalation of the conflict. Consequently, British officials wanted the peace process to run its course. Some of them were even prepared to contemplate the country’s eventual reunification under Ho Chi Minh following the all-Vietnam elections scheduled for 1956. At best, the elections would result in a non-communist victory; at worst, they would at least delay Ho’s takeover of southern Vietnam for a further two years, which would buy time for Britain to shore up its defences in the region against any further communist advances, especially towards Malaya where its forces were already engaged in trying to stamp out an insurgency.<sup>31</sup>

Graves’s warnings about the refugee build-up and the Diem government’s problems fed directly into these concerns about guaranteeing the Geneva settlement. Since more people lived in the northern than the southern half of Vietnam – perhaps one-and-a-half to two million more<sup>32</sup> – it made good sense to speed up the transportation of evacuees and entice as many as possible to move, particularly if Diem was correct about the potential size of the exodus. Increasing ‘the numbers moving from the Communist North to the non-Communist South’, calculated James Cable of the foreign office’s South East Asia department (S.E.A.D.), would ‘increase the chances of winning the 1956 elections that are to decide the fate of Vietnam as a whole’. At the same time, he noted, encouraging Diem by a demonstration of British support was ‘obviously desirable’. Not only would strengthening his government enhance the prospects of a larger non-communist vote in the elections; it would also insure against the possibility of his regime’s premature collapse, which might enable the communists to take power in the south sooner rather than later.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>29</sup> T.N.A.: P.R.O., FO 371/112109, DF 1093/23, Saigon to foreign office, 10 Aug. 1954; FO 371/112109, DF 1093/24, Saigon to foreign office, 11 Aug. 1954; FO 371/112026, DF 1015/113, Graves to Eden, 12 Aug. 1954.

<sup>30</sup> Eden, p. 160.

<sup>31</sup> T.N.A.: P.R.O., FO 371/112044, DF 1051/4, Stephenson to Allen, 20 Nov. 1954; FO 371/112044, DF 1051/4, Allen to Stephenson, 9 Dec. 1954. See also Combs, pp. 35–6. Several months before the Geneva Agreements, Malcolm MacDonald, the commissioner-general for the United Kingdom in South East Asia, had emphasized the importance of finding a way to buy time in the region, even at the cost of losing Vietnam (T.N.A.: P.R.O., FO 371/112052, DF 1071/221, ‘The situation in Indo-China’, 30 March 1954).

<sup>32</sup> Paris to State, 27 July 1954 (*FR.U.S.*, xiii, pt. 2, p. 1881).

<sup>33</sup> T.N.A.: P.R.O., FO 371/112109, DF 1093/23, Cable’s file-cover comments, 12 Aug. 1954; FO 371/112044, DF 1051/4, Stephenson to Allen, 20 Nov. 1954.

Given this desire to preserve the Geneva Agreements, the British position on the future of Indochina was evidently at odds with that of the Americans. Although U.S. policymakers acknowledged that the accords probably represented the best deal that could be expected after the success of Ho Chi Minh's forces on the battlefield, they did not share London's interest in upholding them. Reluctant to reward what it regarded as the fruits of communist aggression, the Eisenhower administration neither participated fully in the Geneva Conference nor endorsed its outcome. Even as the other delegates discussed the prospect of a peace agreement based on the temporary partition of Vietnam, the Americans had begun to plan how to turn such a boundary into a permanent fixture to contain further communist expansion. After the conference ended, U.S. officials looked to the Diem government to create an anti-communist bastion south of the seventeenth parallel; they also expressed doubts about the holding of all-Vietnam elections in 1956 because of the likelihood that Ho would secure a victory in such an exercise. The U.S. position deeply troubled the British, who regarded the elections as a cornerstone of the Indochina settlement. 'We should not be able to support any United States manoeuvre to upset the Geneva agreements in this way', noted S.E.A.D.'s John G. Tahourdin at the end of August.<sup>34</sup> These differences over the peace settlement make it clear that while the British and Americans both responded to Diem's request to help evacuate refugees, they did not do so for the same reasons; London's response was an effort to bolster the Geneva Agreements but Washington's was part of a strategy to bypass or sabotage them.

Hence, for its own particular reasons, the foreign office agreed on the political value of assisting with the refugee evacuation and, in response to Graves's messages from Saigon, S.E.A.D. began to explore the cost and feasibility of British participation. James Cable, who served as S.E.A.D.'s liaison on the issue, proceeded to contact the relevant government departments to enquire about the availability of shipping and aircraft, both commercial and military.<sup>35</sup> The foreign office also asked Graves for more information about the proposed scale, nature and timing of the British contribution, as well as the efforts being made by the French and the Americans. Graves estimated that there were potentially some 250,000 refugees. Since the French and Americans would transport 100,000 each, he explained, 'our main objective must be to help get away some 50,000'. He warned that time was of the essence; would-be refugees were 'beginning to lose faith in the ability of local authorities . . . to get them into the stream of evacuation' and might be deterred from leaving unless 'the present jam can be cleared'. In pressing for a sizeable and speedy response, Graves cast doubt on the possibility of using aircraft, noting the 'great technical difficulty arising from inadequate ground facilities and dispersal areas'.<sup>36</sup> This news focused the foreign office's attention on shipping options for transporting refugees.

Cable had arranged an inter-departmental meeting at the India office for the afternoon of 19 August in order to discuss the alternatives. At this point, he

<sup>34</sup> T.N.A.: P.R.O., FO 371/112026, DF 1015/114, Tahourdin to Graves, 30 Aug. 1954. For Anglo-American differences over the Geneva Agreements, especially the issue of elections, see Combs.

<sup>35</sup> T.N.A.: P.R.O., FO 371/112109, DF 1093/23, Cable's file-cover comments, 12 Aug. 1954. Perhaps his role in the *Warrior* evacuation helps to explain Cable's emergence in later life as a prominent writer and commentator on the subject of 'naval diplomacy'.

<sup>36</sup> T.N.A.: P.R.O., FO 371/112109, DF 1093/23, foreign office to Saigon, 13 Aug. 1954; FO 371/112109, DF 1093/28, Saigon to foreign office, 15 Aug. 1954. The problems with air transport seem to have been at the receiving end in Saigon (see T.N.A.: P.R.O., FO 371/112110, DF 1093/39, Saigon to foreign office, 24 Aug. 1954).

commented shortly before the meeting, it 'looks as if merchant shipping is the only answer', because the Navy seemed less than enthusiastic about employing its ships as passenger ferries. Sir Charles Lambe, the commander-in-chief, Far Eastern station, told the admiralty that he considered the use of naval vessels for this purpose to be 'quite unsuitable'. Even a carrier could not transport many people, he argued, and H.M.S. *Warrior*, the only vessel of the kind at his disposal, was committed to the United Nations command in Korea.<sup>37</sup> At the inter-departmental meeting, however, the admiralty's representative was a little more accommodating than Lambe. Although *Warrior* had other responsibilities in the region, he explained, it was not scheduled to return to U.N. duties until 25 September; in the meantime, it could reach Haiphong within eight to ten days of receiving orders and move thousands of people. By contrast, the ministry of transport's representative at the meeting pointed out that there were no suitable, reasonably priced merchant ships immediately available for charter; there would be plenty after the end of the annual pilgrimage to Mecca, but that would not be until the end of September. This information convinced the foreign office formally to ask the Navy for its assistance and to approach the treasury – an altogether more daunting task – for £16,000 to cover the estimated costs of the fuel and provisions for *Warrior*'s participation in evacuating refugees.<sup>38</sup>

The admiralty suggested that the carrier could make several trips between North and South Vietnam and move some 8,000 people. This figure was a far cry from the 50,000 originally envisaged by Graves, but by this time it was clear that any British role in the evacuation would be no more than symbolic. The day before the inter-departmental meeting, Graves informed the foreign office that there was now 'an abundance' of French and U.S. shipping available to transport refugees. As S.E.A.D.'s John C. Cloake noted, this turn of events weakened the department's case vis-à-vis the treasury because the proposed operation no longer appeared necessary from a practical standpoint and could only be justified in terms of its intangible political effect on the embattled Diem government.<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless, Graves in Saigon, and his colleagues in London, continued to view the mission as an important one. 'It is clear that British assistance is not essential', John Tahourdin acknowledged, but 'our part in the Geneva settlement lays on us some responsibility for the present plight of the South Vietnam Government'. Selwyn Lloyd, minister of state for foreign affairs, struck a similar note in his letter to the admiralty requesting the Navy's support. 'We believe that a gesture of this sort would do a great deal to encourage the Vietnamese, who are rather overpowered by their present difficulties', he wrote. 'It was agreed at Geneva that elections would be held in 1956 to determine the future fate of the country. It is important that we should do everything possible meanwhile to put heart into the non-Communist element of the population'.<sup>40</sup>

The treasury grudgingly consented to the operation, subject to the Navy's approval, and the admiralty, in spite of its own reservations, agreed to *Warrior*'s participation.

<sup>37</sup> T.N.A.: P.R.O., FO 371/112110, DF 1093/36, Cable minute, 17 Aug. 1954; FO 371/112109, DF 1093/32, C.-in-C., F.E.S., to admiralty, 17 Aug. 1954.

<sup>38</sup> T.N.A.: P.R.O., FO 371/112110, DF 1093/37, 'Vietnamese request for assistance in evacuation from North Vietnam', 20 Aug. 1954.

<sup>39</sup> T.N.A.: P.R.O., FO 371/112110, DF 1093/33, Saigon to foreign office, 18 Aug. 1954 (and Cloake's file-cover comments).

<sup>40</sup> T.N.A.: P.R.O., FO 371/112110, DF 1093/37, 'Vietnamese request for assistance in evacuation from North Vietnam', 20 Aug. 1954; FO 371/112110, DF 1093/37, draft letter (Lloyd to Thomas), 21 Aug. 1954.

On 25 August, James P. L. Thomas, first lord of the admiralty, told the foreign office that although *Warrior* was already assigned to U.N. duties and a carrier was 'not a suitable vessel for transporting civilians', he was 'anxious that the Navy should do all it can to help'. He therefore proposed to ask the U.N. commander in Korea to release the ship until 5 October, allowing it to make two or three ferry trips between North and South Vietnam.<sup>41</sup> He also sent word to inform *Warrior* about its prospective new mission.

*Warrior* was at the Singapore naval base when its commanding officer, Captain Patrick J. Milner-Barry, received news that the ship might be called upon to participate in the refugee evacuation. After consulting with dockyard officers, he estimated that appropriate modifications to the vessel could be finished in just seventy-two hours.<sup>42</sup> In the meantime, the ministry of defence scrambled to secure the carrier's temporary release from service with the U.N. command.<sup>43</sup> While firm orders for the ship remained pending, rumours of its Vietnamese excursion had already begun to circulate among the crew. 'There's always a "buzz"', recalled Les Smith, a former able seaman, of the way in which important information invariably reaches the ears of news-hungry sailors. Smith, who like so many of his predecessors had 'joined-the-Navy-to-see-the-world', eagerly recorded this latest 'buzz' about a trip to Indochina in his diary on 27 August.<sup>44</sup> The following day, Captain Milner-Barry received orders confirming the operation and informed an expectant ship's company about their new assignment.<sup>45</sup>

The 'go-ahead' sparked a feverish effort to prepare *Warrior* for its mission. Dockyard workers proceeded to carry out the necessary physical modifications to the carrier, notably the construction of washing and toilet facilities for the comfort of civilian passengers. They fitted salt-water wash troughs and showers in the after-lift well and 'squatting-type' latrines on the starboard boat deck; the latter discharged over the ship's side, with a continuous flow of seawater pumped through the pipes to flush them. Extra personnel also joined the ship to meet some of the other likely needs of the refugees. The additions to the crew included three nurses, six Chinese cooks, two 'interpreters-cum-searchers' and a small working party to clean up after the evacuees. The well-being of the ship's company was not forgotten either, with 1,100 cases of beer brought on board for the voyage. Perhaps this gesture sought to compensate the sailors for the loss of shore leave, or the unusual nature of the job at hand, because although the Navy still issued the traditional rum ration, beer was not normally kept on its ships.<sup>46</sup>

For some members of *Warrior*'s crew, the requirements of the mission precluded their participation in the trip to Indochina. Since the carrier's hangar would serve as accommodation for the refugees, it had to be cleared of the ship's two squadrons of

<sup>41</sup> T.N.A.: P.R.O., FO 371/112110, DF 1093/42, Brooke to Lloyd, 27 Aug. 1954; FO 371/112110, DF 1093/41, Thomas to Lloyd, 25 Aug. 1954.

<sup>42</sup> T.N.A.: P.R.O., ADM 1/25561, Milner-Barry to C.-in-C., FE.S., 14 Sept. 1954.

<sup>43</sup> T.N.A.: P.R.O., FO 371/112110, DF 1093/41, ministry of defence to Tokyo, 27 Aug. 1954.

<sup>44</sup> Les Smith interview, 22 May 2005; Les Smith diary, 27 Aug. 1954. The attraction of travel and adventure to enlisted personnel is discussed in C. McKee, *Sober Men and True: Sailor Lives in the Royal Navy, 1900-45* (Cambridge, Mass., 2002), pp. 31-3.

<sup>45</sup> T.N.A.: P.R.O., ADM 1/25561, Milner-Barry to C.-in-C., FE.S., 14 Sept. 1954; Smith diary, 28 Aug. 1954.

<sup>46</sup> T.N.A.: P.R.O., ADM 1/25561, Milner-Barry to C.-in-C., FE.S., 14 Sept. 1954; Smith interview, 22 May 2005.

aircraft, along with their equipment and personnel. The squadrons spent the next few weeks at the Royal Naval air station, Sembawang, from where their Sea Furies and Fireflies flew strikes against the Malayan insurgents.<sup>47</sup> Not all of the naval airmen were too disappointed by this turn of events. The creature comforts of life at Sembawang – proper beds, a swimming pool and regular ‘runs ashore’ – helped to compensate for missing out on the refugee evacuation. Len Hillier, a nineteen-year-old national serviceman and naval air mechanic, spent much of his sojourn ashore ‘sunbathing, drinking beer, [and] playing billiards’, and certainly did not envy those sailors remaining aboard the carrier. ‘We went on a bloody good holiday’, he commented, ‘and left them to get on with it’.<sup>48</sup>

*Warrior* sailed from Singapore on the afternoon of 31 August. As it left the jetty, all the pipes on the improvised set of latrines were blasting water over the side of the ship, which prompted the flag officer at Singapore to send a signal remarking on the impressive-looking ‘water-cooled secret anti-submarine weapon’.<sup>49</sup> Preparations to make the ship ready for the evacuation continued during the voyage to Haiphong. On 2 September, Captain Milner-Barry issued orders assigning his officers to various tasks – embarkation and disembarkation, accommodation, food, etc. – and detailing those areas of the ship that would be off-limits to the refugees.<sup>50</sup> On the same day, Able Seaman Smith discovered that he would be working closely with the evacuees and the following day he was vaccinated against smallpox. Shortly before arriving off the coast of northern Vietnam, the crew painted two Union Jacks on the ship’s flight deck for the purpose of identification.<sup>51</sup>

On the morning of 4 September, *Warrior* weighed anchor in the Passe Henriette, at the entrance to Ha Long Bay and its archipelago of rocky sentinels. The ship’s orders were to stay outside territorial waters to avoid being accused of violating the Geneva ceasefire agreement.<sup>52</sup> Consequently, the French planned to use L.C.T.s, the landing craft of World War II-fame, to ferry refugees from Haiphong to the waiting carrier. In the week before *Warrior*’s arrival, British representatives in Saigon and Hanoi had contacted the authorities responsible for the evacuation – Vietnamese, French and American – to ask them ‘to fit’ the ship into their programme.<sup>53</sup> According to the consulate’s Rex Johnston-Smith, the process ‘worked with clock like precision’. At 6.30 on 4 September, two hours before *Warrior* anchored offshore, he watched the start of an ‘orderly embarkation’ of refugees on two L.C.T.s bound for the incoming carrier. Stood alongside him were Admiral Jean-Marie Querville, the French commander at Haiphong, and Dang Trinh Ky, the mayor of the city. Given the early hour of the morning, Johnston-Smith took their presence to be ‘an earnest official interest in [the] British contribution’ – precisely the response for which

<sup>47</sup> T.N.A.: P.R.O., ADM 1/25561, Milner-Barry to C.-in-C., F.E.S., 14 Sept. 1954; Len Hillier interview, 22 May 2005.

<sup>48</sup> Hillier interview, 22 May 2005; A. C. Allen letter, 9 Aug. 2005; Brian Noblett letter, 22 Aug. 2005; G. A. Thacker letter, 1 Aug. 2005.

<sup>49</sup> Portsmouth, Naval Historical Branch, *H.M.S. Warrior Commissioning Book* (hereafter *H.M.S. Warrior Commissioning Book*), p. 27.

<sup>50</sup> T.N.A.: P.R.O., ADM 1/25561, Milner-Barry to C.-in-C., F.E.S., 14 Sept. 1954.

<sup>51</sup> Smith diary, 2, 3 Sept. 1954.

<sup>52</sup> T.N.A.: P.R.O., FO 371/112109, DF 1093/28, Saigon to foreign office, 15 Aug. 1954; FO 371/112110, DF 1093/41, C.-in-C., F.E.S., to F.O.M.A., Cdre. Hong Kong, *Warrior*, 30 Aug. 1954.

<sup>53</sup> T.N.A.: P.R.O., FO 959/143, Saigon to Harvest Haiphong, 31 Aug. 1954; FO 959/143, Hanoi to Saigon, 2 Sept. 1954.

the British had hoped.<sup>54</sup> When all was ready, a total of 1,454 Vietnamese<sup>55</sup> set out from Haiphong for the *Warrior*.

The sailors awaiting them were not particularly well informed about the reasons for the refugees' flight, but they were not ignorant of the situation either. Tom Dooley's rather glib comment about U.S. servicemen involved in the evacuation – that 'few of us knew anything about Indo-China other than the fact that it was south of China and east of India'<sup>56</sup> – does not ring true, at least as far as their British counterparts were concerned. Even before being briefed about their upcoming mission, most of *Warrior's* sailors seem to have been aware of France's involvement in Indochina and the general state of the conflict there.<sup>57</sup> They came from a generation, moreover, that was obviously not unacquainted with either the geography of Asia or the wages of war. 'We usually knew of someone mixed up in some part of the globe', explained 'Griff' Griffiths, a leading signalman who was brought up in a close-knit mining community and had a number of relatives serving in the armed forces. Growing up in the 'Empire's shadow', as historian Niall Ferguson put it, tended to foster a certain familiarity with world affairs, as well as the consequences of armed conflict, and perhaps such knowledge and experience helped to steel the members of *Warrior's* crew for their imminent encounter with some of the human fall-out from the Indochina war. For example, Griffiths could vividly recollect the pitiful newsreel images of French refugees fleeing the advancing Germans in 1940.<sup>58</sup>

That said, the British were not really sure what lay ahead, nor was transporting people part of the carrier's normal routine. 'We didn't know what to expect [and] I don't think the powers-that-be knew [either]', noted John Hume of his fellow sailors and their officers.<sup>59</sup> Curious and apprehensive about the arrival of the Vietnamese, the crew lined the sides of the ship as the first landing craft came into view. Since the carrier towered over the incoming transports, the sailors could see little of the evacuees initially except a sea of hats. Conjuring up images of the 'mysterious Orient', Les Smith half expected to see a bevy of beautiful young women ascending the gangway and was quite taken aback as the figures below finally came into view. 'Griff' Griffiths, who watched through one of the ship's portholes as the refugees began to embark, could not contain his surprise either. Unaware of the custom of tooth-blackening among Vietnamese – through deliberate 'lacquering' or the staining effects of chewing betel – Griffiths turned to a shipmate in alarm and exclaimed, 'None of these women have teeth!'<sup>60</sup>

What most struck the sailors, though, was the poor physical condition and nervous demeanour of the evacuees. Most of them were women and children,<sup>61</sup> some of the latter without parents, and they were all in a 'terrible state', observed Bill Etches of the dirty and sweat-stained refugees. Captain Milner-Barry reported to the admiralty

<sup>54</sup> T.N.A.: P.R.O., FO 959/143, Hanoi to Saigon, 7 Sept. 1954.

<sup>55</sup> T.N.A.: P.R.O., ADM 53/139970, H.M.S. *Warrior* ship's log, 4 Sept. 1954. Milner-Barry's subsequent report gives a figure of 1,455 for the number who came aboard *Warrior* (T.N.A.: P.R.O., ADM 1/25561, Milner-Barry to C.-in-C., FE.S., 14 Sept. 1954).

<sup>56</sup> Dooley, 'Deliver us from evil', p. 26.

<sup>57</sup> 'Griff' Griffiths email, 27 Jan. 2006.

<sup>58</sup> N. Ferguson, *Empire: the Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power* (New York, 2003), pp. xvi–xx; Griffiths email, 27 Jan. 2006.

<sup>59</sup> John Hume interview, 1 June 2005 (Hume served as a petty officer aboard *Warrior*).

<sup>60</sup> Smith interview, 22 May 2005; 'Griff' Griffiths letter, 28 July 2005.

<sup>61</sup> Presumably, the high proportion of women and children was due to the recruitment of young men into the armed forces of both sides during the Indochina war.

that 'a few men and women are blind, many women are pregnant, [and] among the children there are obvious cases of undernourishment as well as eye and skin disease'.<sup>62</sup> In addition, the Vietnamese seemed bewildered and not a little afraid. Tom Dooley, who had seen similar expressions on the faces of refugees aboard his ship, attributed much of this trepidation to communist propaganda. 'They had been told in great detail', he wrote, that 'American sailors would throw the old people overboard, cut off the right hands of the new-born, and sell the comely girls as concubines'.<sup>63</sup> Presumably, *Warrior's* refugees made little distinction between British and American seamen, so tales of such behaviour by foreign sailors had obviously failed to dissuade them from leaving the north. Nonetheless, perhaps they served to exacerbate the traumatic nature of their exodus and help to explain the nervous glances that they gave *Warrior's* gaping crew. 'We were a bit shocked', John Hume recalled, as the sailors watched the frightened and bedraggled Vietnamese making their way onto the ship; 'There was a bit of a silence'.<sup>64</sup>

That the refugees appeared apprehensive and in poor shape is no great surprise; they had no doubt completed a long and difficult journey. Milner-Barry described the majority of them as 'tobacco planters from outlying villages in the Delta area',<sup>65</sup> in which case they had probably travelled some distance to reach Haiphong. John Hume heard that some of them had walked up to forty miles.<sup>66</sup> While there is no evidence that they had suffered any physical abuse along the way at the hands of the communists, they may have experienced other forms of intimidation designed to deter them from leaving. By early September, the D.R.V. leadership had become very concerned at the scale of the evacuation and sought to step up its campaign to stem the flow of evacuees.<sup>67</sup> Even reaching the sanctuary of a chaotic Haiphong would not have brought an end to the refugees' troubles – although it is unclear just how long, and under what conditions, they had to wait in the city before setting out for the *Warrior*.

Finally, to compound their misery, the refugees had to endure a journey of four hours or more to cover the approximately twenty miles from Haiphong to the carrier's anchorage in the Passe Henriette. There is no description of this part of their trip, but Thomas Mack, an official with the U.S. foreign operations administration, recorded the unpleasant nature of a similar voyage that he had made a few weeks earlier when accompanying a group of refugees to an American vessel waiting offshore. Since the passage crossed the open sea, Mack wrote, the landing craft 'rolled heavily, resulting in mass seasickness. The passengers were unable to move and vomited where they lay'. Like those headed for the *Warrior*, the Vietnamese were also packed uncomfortably close together and exposed to the elements, alternately bathed in sunshine and drenched by intermittent showers. To make matters worse, 'exhaust fumes settled among the refugees, adding to their discomforts and made breathing

<sup>62</sup> Bill Etches interview, 22 May 2005 (Etches served as a stoker aboard *Warrior*); Naval Historical Branch, 'Admiralty news summary', Sept. 1954, p. 12. For the crew's reaction, see also Hume interview, 1 June 2005; Albert Oliver interview, 22 May 2005; and Smith interview, 22 May 2005.

<sup>63</sup> Dooley, 'Deliver us from evil', pp. 29–31. See also U.S.N.A., RG 469, Mission to Vietnam, Resettlement and Rehabilitation Division, Field Service Classified Subject Files, 1954–8 (box 5), Poulin to Adler, 20 Apr. 1955.

<sup>64</sup> Hume interview, 1 June 2005.

<sup>65</sup> Naval Historical Branch, 'Admiralty news summary', Sept. 1954, p. 12.

<sup>66</sup> Hume interview, 1 June 2005.

<sup>67</sup> 'Chi thi cua Ban Bi Thu [Instructions from the secretariat]', 5 Sept. 1954 (*Complete Party Documents*, xv. 263–70).

difficult'.<sup>68</sup> Battered by this latest leg of their journey, and heading into an uncertain future, it is little wonder that *Warrior's* new passengers looked dishevelled and disorientated as they boarded the ship.

Les Smith, who had been assigned to assist with their embarkation, quickly recovered from his initial shock at the state of the refugees. After all, he reminded himself, they were fleeing from their homes, not out for a Sunday stroll. As the evacuees shouldered the remnants of their worldly belongings and made their way up the gangway, he and his shipmates sprang into action and sought to lend a helping hand. To their surprise and embarrassment, they experienced some difficulty in managing the weighty bundles that their slightly built passengers skilfully balanced at the ends of poles slung over their shoulders. Smith was not much bigger than the average Vietnamese, but even burly sailors struggled to cope with the baggage carried by individuals only half their size. One Vietnamese man, obviously less than impressed with the crew's clumsy efforts, waved away Smith's attempt to offer assistance.<sup>69</sup>

Once aboard, the refugees received a 'thorough dusting' with insecticide to guard against the spread of contagious diseases.<sup>70</sup> The ship's detachment of Royal Marines also searched them and their baggage for weapons. This latter precaution followed advice given to the British by Captain William R. Cox of the U.S.S. *Montague*. Cox, who had commanded two round-trips between Haiphong and Saigon as part of the U.S. Navy's evacuation efforts, visited *Warrior* shortly after its arrival on the morning of 4 September and painted an alarming picture of the 'horrors' that lay ahead for the carrier and its crew. He also reported that searches of refugees aboard the *Montague* had uncovered large quantities of hand grenades. Most likely, these weapons belonged to anti-communist militia, not D.R.V. agents, but the British had no intention of embarking armed men, friendly or otherwise. That some of their passengers might turn out to be a danger to the ship, perhaps even saboteurs, certainly put some of the sailors on edge, especially those actively involved in the embarkation. 'The apprehension was difficult to describe', observed John Hume; 'You felt sorry for them [but], at the same time, you had to be very alert'. Albert Oliver, a naval airman, recalled that it was 'the first time in my life I'd ever thought of terrorism'. In the end, the search turned up 'nothing more sinister than bottles of petrol', noted Captain Milner-Barry.<sup>71</sup>

The embarkation took just over three hours. With the process completed, and the evacuees spread out in family groups on the floor of the hangar, *Warrior* weighed anchor and set sail for Cap St. Jacques.<sup>72</sup> The carrier was no cruise liner, as one former sailor pointed out,<sup>73</sup> but the arrangements made for handling the Vietnamese helped to ensure a safe and relatively comfortable passage. The ship's sickbay treated the refugees' physical ailments, while the galley served them two meals a day and even managed to cook the rice to their exacting standards. To facilitate the circulation of air through the hangar and provide some relief from the stifling heat that built up below

<sup>68</sup> U.S.N.A., RG 469, Mission to Vietnam, Transportation, Communications and Power Division Subject Files, 1951-6 (box 13), Mack to Chief, T.C.PI.&M. Division, 26 Aug. 1954. See also Dooley, 'Deliver us from evil', p. 29.

<sup>69</sup> Smith interview, 22 May 2005; *H.M.S. Warrior Commissioning Book*, p. 28.

<sup>70</sup> T.N.A.: P.R.O., ADM 1/25561, Milner-Barry to C.-in-C., F.E.S., 14 Sept. 1954.

<sup>71</sup> T.N.A.: P.R.O., ADM 1/25561, Milner-Barry to C.-in-C., F.E.S., 14 Sept. 1954; Hume interview, 1 June 2005; Oliver interview, 22 May 2005.

<sup>72</sup> Naval Historical Branch, 'Admiralty news summary', Sept. 1954, p. 12; T.N.A.: P.R.O., ADM 53/139970, *H.M.S. Warrior* ship's log, 4 Sept. 1954.

<sup>73</sup> Griffiths letter, 28 July 2005.

decks, the after-lift was lowered permanently halfway. In addition, specially constructed stairways that connected the hangar to the flight deck gave the refugees access to a roped-off area where they could get some fresh air and stretch their legs.<sup>74</sup> As for the improvised toilet and washing facilities, Les Smith noted that not all the Vietnamese chose to use the latrines but the salt-water showers proved a great hit, especially with the children.<sup>75</sup>

Besides providing for their physical needs, *Warrior's* crew made every effort to lift the refugees' spirits and keep them entertained during the voyage south. The Vietnamese were treated to a programme of 'silly symphonies' cartoons, occasional performances by the ships' volunteer band, and recordings of 'suitable oriental music'.<sup>76</sup> One sailor even played Scottish reels for them on his accordion. Although the Highland Fling, Mickey Mouse and Rodgers and Hammerstein's *South Pacific* undoubtedly lost much in translation, such entertainment did break some of the ice between the crew and passengers. 'I don't know what the refugees thought of our efforts', admitted 'Griff' Griffiths, the volunteer band's soprano cornet, but 'they seemed to appreciate [them] or were very polite!'<sup>77</sup> The playful relationship that developed between the ship's company and the Vietnamese children also helped to ease the tension on board. The sailors 'never tired of finding some way to amuse the children', noted *Warrior's* commissioning book. They even dug into their own pockets to buy sweets for them, as well as supplying the adults with cigarettes.<sup>78</sup>

Nearly all of the former sailors contacted for this study recalled that the Vietnamese became friendlier and more relaxed as the voyage went on. Contrary to the predictions of the *Montague's* Captain Cox, they did not prove to be difficult passengers and the three-day voyage south was relatively uneventful. Its trouble-free nature owed something to the efforts of the refugees' leaders, as well as to those of the ship's company. Two Vietnamese army officers acted as the group's official escort, but it was four or five Catholic priests who appeared to exercise most influence and served as the principal liaison between the evacuees and the crew. Milner-Barry believed that they were also responsible for the refugees' original decision to leave their homes. The priests helped to maintain order and reassure their nervous charges; they held Mass on a number of occasions and led prayers for the safety of the ship when it ran into rough weather. John Hume was particularly impressed by one of the priests, who seemed to be 'here, there, [and] everywhere'. Other members of the crew were less enamoured with what they regarded as the clerics' overbearing behaviour in marshalling their flock. 'At mealtimes, many of the refugees were manhandled by these priests which we did not think, at the time, was warranted', observed Anthony Hobbs.<sup>79</sup>

The voyage south took just over sixty hours, *Warrior* arriving off Cap St. Jacques on the morning of 7 September. The U.S. Navy organized the disembarkation, using landing craft to ferry the refugees ashore.<sup>80</sup> In a taped commentary later broadcast on

<sup>74</sup> T.N.A.: P.R.O., ADM 1/25561, Milner-Barry to C.-in-C., F.E.S., 14 Sept. 1954.

<sup>75</sup> Smith interview, 22 May 2005.

<sup>76</sup> T.N.A.: P.R.O., ADM 1/25561, Milner-Barry to C.-in-C., F.E.S., 14 Sept. 1954.

<sup>77</sup> Griffiths letter, 28 July 2005; 'Griff' Griffiths email, 8 Aug. 2005; Smith interview, 22 May 2005.

<sup>78</sup> *H.M.S. Warrior Commissioning Book*, pp. 29–30; Etches interview, 22 May 2005; Hume interview, 1 June 2005; Charles Luff letter, 15 Aug. 2005; Oliver interview, 22 May 2005.

<sup>79</sup> T.N.A.: P.R.O., ADM 1/25561, Milner-Barry to C.-in-C., F.E.S., 14 Sept. 1954; Hume interview, 1 June 2005; Peter Morgan letter, 2 Aug. 2005; Anthony Hobbs letter, 21 Aug. 2005 (Hobbs was a leading telegraphist).

<sup>80</sup> T.N.A.: P.R.O., ADM 53/139970, H.M.S. *Warrior* ship's log, 7 Sept. 1954.

the B.B.C., Commander John G. Wells, *Warrior's* second-in-command, concluded that the Vietnamese 'left us in better shape and with stouter hearts than when they joined'.<sup>81</sup> That was probably true, although this clipped and upbeat summary, so in keeping with the newsreel-style of the day, made no mention of the difficulties the refugees faced in resettling in the south. In fact, some U.S. officials complained angrily about the inadequate facilities at Cap St. Jacques and other reception centres. As one stated, the 'sole criterion' in the evacuation appeared to be that of 'speed in shipping and shunting refugees southward, often with little more concern for their future than if they were so much livestock'.<sup>82</sup> By the time *Warrior* arrived off Cap St. Jacques, the population of the camp there had swelled to some 10,000 people, yet the centre lacked adequate sanitation and medical facilities.<sup>83</sup> Diem told Hubert Graves that he intended to resettle some of these refugees in the nearby Ba Ria area, but the process of moving people from reception camps to permanent settlements was also plagued with problems. In mid September, Graves reported that the task was 'being tackled in a haphazard manner' and that only 9,000 people, out of the more than 150,000 who had so far come south, had been properly resettled.<sup>84</sup> There was little time for *Warrior's* sailors to ponder the fate of their passengers, however. Within a few hours of bidding them farewell, the carrier was once more heading north.

*Warrior* anchored again in the Passe Henriette on 10 September and took onboard another 1,733 refugees. The use of a ship's paint sprayer as a disinfectant gun helped to speed up the embarkation process this second time around, but for the most part the crew employed the same procedures that had proven effective on the first trip. One difference between the two journeys was the character of the refugees. *Warrior's* latest passengers 'were of much more mixed origin than the previous batch, who had come from only two or three villages, and were well under the control of their priests', reported Milner-Barry. He described the second group as 'rather better nourished but more inclined to be obstreperous, particularly if required to queue'. As Les Smith recalled, he had to persuade 'one or two roughnecks' to go to the back of the line at mealtimes.<sup>85</sup> This breach of Anglo-Saxon decorum did not seriously disturb the voyage southwards, however. With one journey already under the sailors' belts, John Hume pointed out, 'everything went a bit more smoothly' on the second trip.<sup>86</sup> Hubert Graves, who visited *Warrior* on 13 September to watch the new batch of refugees disembark, was certainly full of praise for the captain and his crew. 'It was obvious that [the] passengers had thoroughly enjoyed their trip', he enthused in a letter to Anthony Eden, 'and that the blow of upheaval from their homes had been softened by the novelty and friendliness of the many preparations made for their care and amusement'.<sup>87</sup>

<sup>81</sup> *H.M.S. Warrior Commissioning Book*, p. 30.

<sup>82</sup> U.S.N.A., RG 469, Mission to Vietnam, Resettlement and Rehabilitation Division, Field Service Classified Subject Files, 1954-8 (box 2), Brown to Everett, 2 Sept. 1954; RG 469, Mission to Vietnam, Transportation, Communications and Power Division, Subject Files, 1951-6 (box 6), Cap St. Jacques to S.T.E.M. (Special Technical and Economic Mission) (U.S.O.M. (United States Operations Mission) 9 & 10), 31 Aug. 1954.

<sup>83</sup> U.S.N.A., RG 469, Mission to Vietnam, Transportation, Communications and Power Division, Subject Files, 1951-6 (box 6), Cap St. Jacques to S.T.E.M., 8 Sept. 1954, and refugee affairs to S.T.E.M., 14 Sept. 1954.

<sup>84</sup> T.N.A.: P.R.O., FO 959/143, record of conversation, 31 Aug. 1954; FO 371/112110, DF 1093/49, Saigon to foreign office, 17 Sept. 1954.

<sup>85</sup> T.N.A.: P.R.O., ADM 1/25561, Milner-Barry to C.-in-C., F.E.S., 14 Sept. 1954; Smith interview, 22 May 2005.

<sup>86</sup> Hume interview, 1 June 2005.

<sup>87</sup> T.N.A.: P.R.O., ADM 1/25561, Graves to Eden, 13 Sept. 1954.

The second voyage proved to be *Warrior's* last. Originally, the ship had been expected to complete two or three round-trips before resuming duties in Korean waters with the U.N. command. Shortly after the start of the mission, Sir Charles Lambe proposed that *Warrior* also make one or two additional runs because an agreement to reduce Commonwealth forces in Korea suddenly obviated the need for the carrier's return to the peninsula.<sup>88</sup> Developments in North Vietnam scuttled these plans, however. When *Warrior* picked up its second batch of refugees in Haiphong, Captain Milner-Barry learned that there were only about 6,000 evacuees left in the city. He also noted that there were six U.S. vessels in the *Passe Henriette* already waiting to receive them.<sup>89</sup> Graves informed Lambe on 12 September that the 'pool of refugees has suddenly dried up' and there was 'no justification for [a] further trip by HMS *Warrior*'. He attributed this turn of events to three causes: communist interference with the evacuation; the desire of many peasants to finish reaping the rice harvest before leaving; and rumours of the poor reception facilities in the south which deterred would-be refugees.<sup>90</sup>

*Warrior's* crew was not too disappointed to hear this news. Although the evacuation was an interesting break in the ship's routine, it had been a somewhat trying and sobering experience.<sup>91</sup> Ray Maçon, a leading airman, described feeling some of the same sense of relief that follows a funeral; that a sad but necessary task was over and done with. Concern for the future of the refugees also cast something of a shadow over the whole enterprise. As Les Smith explained, 'I just thought, "Well, poor devils, what's going to happen to them, I wonder?"' Yet, both Maçon and Smith believed the operation had been a success. Indeed, *Warrior's* sailors were proud of the part that they had played in helping the refugees. 'We all felt we were doing something worthwhile and easing the suffering of many people', commented Charlie Luff, a naval airman.<sup>92</sup>

This sense of satisfaction derived only in part from Cold War ideology or political conviction. To be sure, the sailors had been briefed about the background to the refugees' flight and knew that their passengers had chosen to leave the north to escape communist control. 'I thought, "Well, they're going down [south] because they want to"', and "'if that's what they want, they've achieved it'", recalled Les Smith. Or, as 'Griff' Griffiths put it, 'I felt at the time we were doing a service [for] these people and helping them to a better life'.<sup>93</sup> Such comments, however, suggest little of the crusading anti-communism that so coloured the attitude of Tom Dooley and other Americans involved in the exodus. On the U.S.S. *Menard*, for example, Jack Majesky's commanding officer explained the evacuation in strikingly belligerent terms:

<sup>88</sup> T.N.A.: P.R.O., FO 371/112110, DF 1093/43, C.-in-C., F.E.S., to admiralty, 6 Sept. 1954; FO 371/112110, DF 1093/46, C.-in-C., F.E.S., to COMNAVFE (Commander, United States Naval Forces, Far East), 11 Sept. 1954. Besides transporting Vietnamese refugees, Graves noted that on a proposed third trip *Warrior* would have picked up Pakistanis – and presumably any other citizens of Commonwealth countries – who wanted to leave the north. The ship would then have sailed up to the port of Saigon to disembark them (see T.N.A.: P.R.O., FO 371/112110, DF 1093/52, Saigon to foreign office, 23 Sept. 1954).

<sup>89</sup> T.N.A.: P.R.O., ADM 1/25561, Milner-Barry to C.-in-C., F.E.S., 14 Sept. 1954.

<sup>90</sup> T.N.A.: P.R.O., FO 959/143, Saigon to C.-in-C., F.E.S., 12 Sept. 1954; FO 371/112110, DF 1093/49, Saigon to foreign office, 17 Sept. 1954.

<sup>91</sup> *H.M.S. Warrior Commissioning Book*, p. 30.

<sup>92</sup> Ray Maçon interview, 21 May 2005; Smith interview, 22 May 2005; Luff letter, 15 Aug. 2005.

<sup>93</sup> Smith interview, 22 May 2005; Griffiths email, 8 Aug. 2005.

He came on the old loud speaker and . . . it was like going to see a John Wayne movie. He [was] saying, 'Hey, we're headed down there where the Commies are, those sons of bitches', and so forth and so on . . . I don't remember anybody coming and saying, 'Well, hey, we're going down there and we're going to pick up a bunch of people in the north and we're going to take them down to the south'.<sup>94</sup>

By contrast, *Warrior's* sailors seem to have been most influenced by feelings of common humanity rather than Cold War politics. They were pleased simply to offer assistance to people so obviously in need. The operation was an opportunity to do 'a bit of good instead of just cruising round and round and round', John Hume observed. 'They were people. We were just helping. That's the way it should be.'<sup>95</sup>

In fact, the evacuation was an emotional experience that made a lasting impression on many of the crew. Hume described that two-week period aboard *Warrior* in September 1954 as one of the highlights of a naval career that spanned twenty-four years, including the tail end of the Second World War; his experience with the refugee children also influenced his decision to enter the childcare profession after he left the service in 1967.<sup>96</sup> The plight of the children struck a particularly deep chord with the sailors, not least with those who had once been young evacuees themselves, fleeing the wrath of Hitler's Luftwaffe. For Albert Oliver, who remembered how 'very tired and frightened' he was when forced as a schoolboy to evacuate wartime London, or Les Smith, who described being evacuated as a nine-year-old from his home in Birmingham as a 'very disturbing thing', it was not difficult to sympathize, even identify, with the refugees, especially the younger ones.<sup>97</sup> The birth of three babies onboard ship – one during the first voyage south and two during the second – also remains one of the most frequently mentioned memories of the evacuation.<sup>98</sup> 'We all gave a big cheer', John Hume recalled of the sailors' response on hearing the news of the births. 'We were all delighted. We were all Dads that day.'<sup>99</sup> As *Warrior* sailed into Singapore at the end of the operation, the crew unfurled a banner depicting 'three storks carrying their customary burden' as the ship's 'battle honours'.<sup>100</sup>

Was *Warrior's* mission a success? The sailors certainly thought so. They had transported over 3,000 refugees from North to South Vietnam, carrying out their duties diligently and with genuine concern for the welfare of their passengers. As historian Neil McCart notes, there must be hundreds of Vietnamese still alive today who remember the care taken by *Warrior's* crew to ease their passage southwards.<sup>101</sup> Like the sailors they had sent to Indochina, British policymakers also appeared satisfied with the outcome of the mission. 'I have heard many expressions of appreciation on all sides – Vietnamese, French and American – that the United Kingdom has played a part in this great operation of movement from north to south', Graves wrote to Eden.

<sup>94</sup> Quoted in R. B. Verrone and L. M. Calkins, *Voices from Vietnam: Eye-Witness Accounts of the War, 1954–75* (Newton Abbot, 2005), p. 18.

<sup>95</sup> Hume interview, 1 June 2005.

<sup>96</sup> Hume interview, 1 June 2005; John Hume email, 14 Aug. 2005.

<sup>97</sup> Oliver interview, 22 May 2005; Albert Oliver letter, 17 Aug. 2005; Smith interview, 22 May 2005.

<sup>98</sup> Another baby was born on one of the L.C.T.s that brought refugees out to *Warrior* on 10 Sept., while two children died from pneumonia during the subsequent voyage southwards (see T.N.A.: P.R.O., ADM 1/25561, Milner-Barry to C.-in-C., F.E.S., 14 Sept. 1954).

<sup>99</sup> Hume interview, 1 June 2005.

<sup>100</sup> *H.M.S. Warrior Commissioning Book*, pp. 30–1.

<sup>101</sup> McCart, p. 177.

*Warrior's* piece of 'naval diplomacy' had provided a tangible demonstration of Britain's continued interest in Indochinese affairs and earned the gratitude of the party that the British had most wanted to please – the government of Ngo Dinh Diem. Graves reported that the Vietnamese prime minister was 'extremely grateful for this token of friendship'. In early October, at a ceremony in Saigon, Diem publicly thanked the British and presented an award to the Navy to commemorate *Warrior's* role in the evacuation.<sup>102</sup> Two months later, when the carrier returned to Britain, the Vietnamese legation in London issued a message reiterating the Diem government's thanks to the sailors for their service. 'On the occasion of her return to home waters may we reiterate on behalf of our hapless compatriots their heartfelt gratitude to all officers and ratings of this gallant ship', the legation's newsletter declared.<sup>103</sup>

Such encomiums notwithstanding, *Warrior's* mission appears less successful when viewed in the broader context of Britain's policy towards Indochina. British officials saw the refugee evacuation as an opportunity to help foster an effective anti-communist government in South Vietnam, one that might even successfully contest the elections scheduled for 1956, but they had already begun to express doubts about Diem's ability to develop such a regime before *Warrior* sailed for Indochina. In August, at the same time as he was pressing London to help with the evacuation, Graves argued that 'Diem did not reveal himself as a man ready and competent to grapple with his country's undoubted difficulties'. John C. Cloake described the prime minister as 'an incapable ditherer'.<sup>104</sup> By October, Graves and some officials in S.E.A.D. had reached the conclusion that Diem was 'a poor horse to put one's money on' and advocated seeking a replacement. 'At present there is little prospect that South Vietnam will present a united anti-communist front at the elections in 1956', a foreign office brief to Downing Street glumly predicted. 'The [Vietnamese communists], whose prestige is high throughout the country and whose organization is well developed may now even hope that they can reunite the country before the elections'.<sup>105</sup> From this perspective, *Warrior's* goal of assisting Diem's government appeared merely to have helped bolster failure.

Eventually, Diem did succeed in establishing his authority and a semblance of order in South Vietnam. Yet, if anything, this outcome presented an even greater challenge to London's Indochina policy. Following the Geneva settlement, the British argued that the key to preserving peace in the region was for all the conference participants to make good-faith effort to carry out the accords, including the provision for all-Vietnam elections. Diem had never recognized the Geneva Agreements, however. Nor, like his American backers, did he support the holding of elections, which he argued would simply allow the communists to cheat their way to power. By mid 1955, after he refused even to go through the pretence of consulting with the D.R.V. government about elections, the Geneva settlement was effectively a dead letter. In the face of Diem's intransigence and America's determination to maintain an independent southern state, British policymakers gradually accepted Vietnam's permanent

<sup>102</sup> T.N.A.: P.R.O., ADM 1/25561, Graves to Eden, 13 Sept. 1954; FO 959/143, record of conversation, 31 Aug. 1954; FO 371/112111, DF 1093/56, Graves to Lambe, 7 Oct. 1954.

<sup>103</sup> T.N.A.: P.R.O., FO 371/112031, DF 1015/239, *Viet Nam News*, vol. 1, no. 6, Christmas number.

<sup>104</sup> T.N.A.: P.R.O., FO 371/112026, DF 1015/113, Graves to Eden, 12 Aug. 1954 (and Cloake's comment, 24 Aug., in the 'Minutes').

<sup>105</sup> T.N.A.: P.R.O., FO 371/112027, DF 1015/162, Graves to Allen, 2 Oct. 1954 (and Cloake's and Paterson's 'Minutes', 11 Oct.); FO 371/112027, DF 1015/157(A), 'The position and prospects in Indo-China', 5 Oct. 1954.

partition.<sup>106</sup> With this turn of events, however, went the prospect of a lasting peace in the region. The emergence of two hostile Vietnamese states, one in the north and the other in the south, set the scene for the bloody struggle that engulfed the country and its people over the next two decades. British fears that renewed conflict in Indochina might spark a third world war never transpired, but the ensuing conflagration was hardly less damaging for those caught up in it.<sup>107</sup> For *Warrior's* refugees, there was only to be a short respite between the end of one war and the beginning of another.

<sup>106</sup> Combs, pp. 49–53; J. Waite, 'The end of the first Indochina war: an international history' (unpublished Ohio University Ph.D. thesis, 2005), pp. 435–7. Waite notes that by accepting permanent partition the British government was actually returning to a solution of the Indochina conflict that it had favoured before the start of the Geneva Conference.

<sup>107</sup> Combs, pp. 54–6.