

THE BOAT PEOPLE

by Captain Laurence Gellerman

IN JULY OF 1982 I WAS MASTER OF THE CONTAINER ship S. S. PRESIDENT MADISON. On a passage from Hong Kong toward Singapore, I got a call from the Watch Mate. He said, "Look out of your office window. There is a boatload of people waving at us." Our ship was in a position off Bombay Reef. This area was often called "Refugee Alley." It was also known for attacks by pirates in the guise of refugees.

I had long felt the premonition that sooner or later I would have to decide. Do I obey International Law and Tradition, or do I assume that they are pirates and go on my way?

I went up to the bridge and telephoned the engine room. The situation was explained briefly to the engineer on watch. He was told to notify Chief Engineer Leo Reames, and then start reducing speed to 60 rpm. I told the mate on watch to get Jon Harrison, the Chief Mate, and tell him to report to the bridge.

We then started a Williamson turn. This maneuver is usually used in a man overboard situation. The rudder is put over on the side toward the person in the water. For instance, if the person went over on the starboard side, the rudder would be put over to starboard to move the propeller away from the victim.

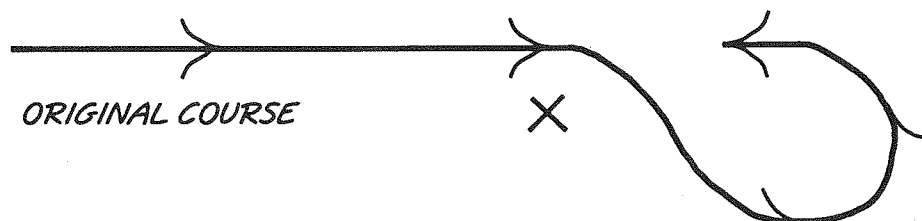
When the vessel is about forty degrees to the right of the course, the helm is put over to port. The vessel is

then brought to the reciprocal of the original course. This puts the ship in a position where she will pass close to the person in the water (see diagram below).

When the Chief Mate came to the bridge, I gave him the following orders: Call all hands in the Deck Department, including the off watch Mates. Take a sea painter from one of the lifeboats. Stretch it from the forward mooring chocks on the main-deck, starboard to the break of the deck near the gangway. Allow a bight to hang about two feet from the water at the pilot ladder station. Rig the pilot ladder with two man-ropes. When we have the boat alongside, permit one man to come aboard. Search this man for weapons and identification. We will decide then what to do about the rest of the people in the boat. I gave the Chief Mate the ship's 38 cal. pistol. During my career as Master, this is the only time I ever removed the weapon from the ship's safe.

We got the engine down to slow ahead, and the ship on the opposite course. The Mate on watch had managed to keep track of the boat on radar. Hence, I was able to locate them visually with binoculars.

We approached the boat on dead slow speed. They got underway, came alongside, and made fast to our sea-painter. Jon Harrison did as instructed. He allowed one man on the ladder, then pulled the bottom of the ladder up out of reach with the





The Boat People. Are they pirates or hitch-hikers?

Courtesy Captain Gellerman

man-ropes. The Mate reported to the bridge that he had found no weapons. In the search, he found what was probably identification printed in Vietnamese, and some Vietnamese money.

Most of the Boat People were women, children, and babies. I told Jon to send Nick Sinkevitch, the Second Mate, and a couple of other crewmen, down into the boat to help the women and children up the ladder. The women and older children came up the ladder without assistance. A safety line was tied around the smaller children to keep them from falling. The babies were brought up by Nick and the Third Mate in a backpack (see photos).

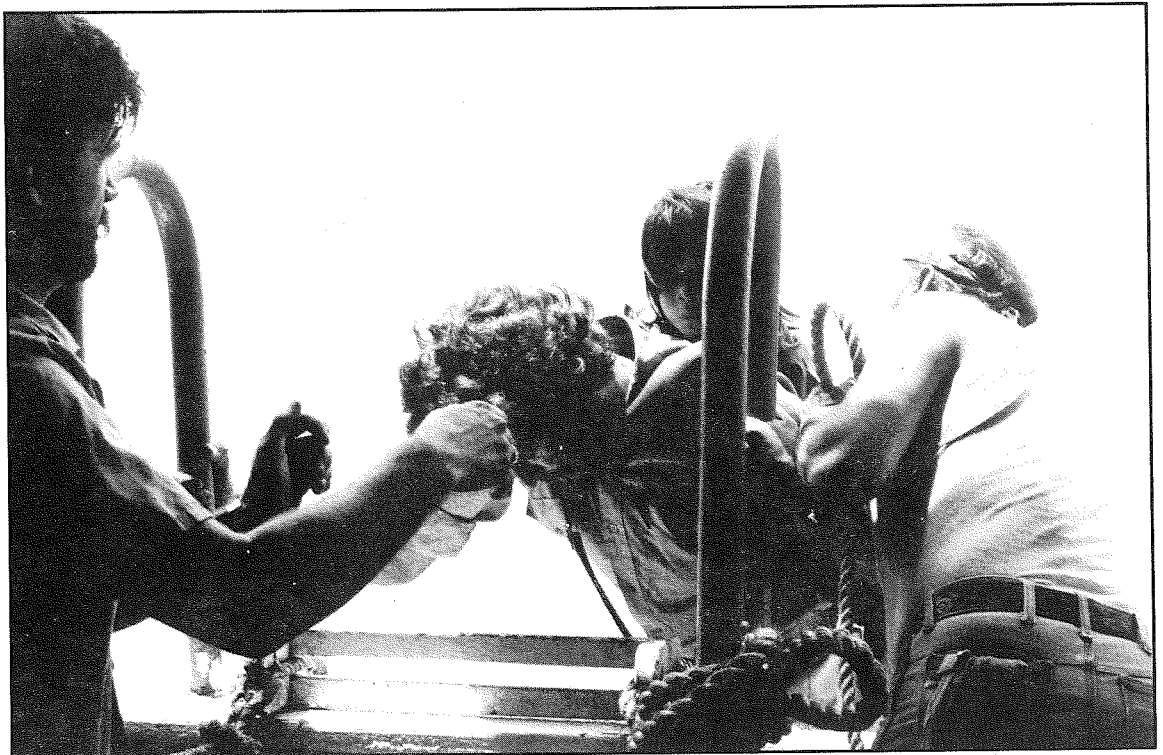
While the boarding of refugees was going on, I sent for Charley Seymore, the Purser, and Mel Newsom, the Chief Steward. We discussed the problem of housing and feeding these people for the rest of the passage to Singapore. We decided to house them in Dry Storeroom No. 7. This area was originally intended to be passenger space. During the building of these ships, American President Lines (APL) management decided against the carriage of

passengers in this class of vessel. The passenger quarters were never installed. There were just two big unfinished rooms on this deck. The Steward was instructed to bring all the cots, spare bedding, and spare towels up to this area.

During the boarding, Jon asked the Deck Cadet to make a photographic record of the boarding. There were also several unofficial photographers among the crew (see photos).

When all the Boat People were on board, the three Mates searched them for weapons. There was only one person among them who could speak any English. There were many bundles of possessions left in the boat. Jon told the English-speaking lady that he would get their possessions on board for them. She said, "No, all that belong Vietnam, don't need anymore." Nick let the boat go from the pilot ladder.

The people were escorted up to Dry Stores #7. John instructed Nguyen Thi Thu, the English-speaking person, as to where the people were to stay. He explained how to get their meals and what areas were



(Top) Rigging the ladders, and (bottom) back-packing the children

Courtesy Captain Gellerman



Helping children climb the ladder

Courtesy Captain Gellerman

out of bounds (see Log entries).

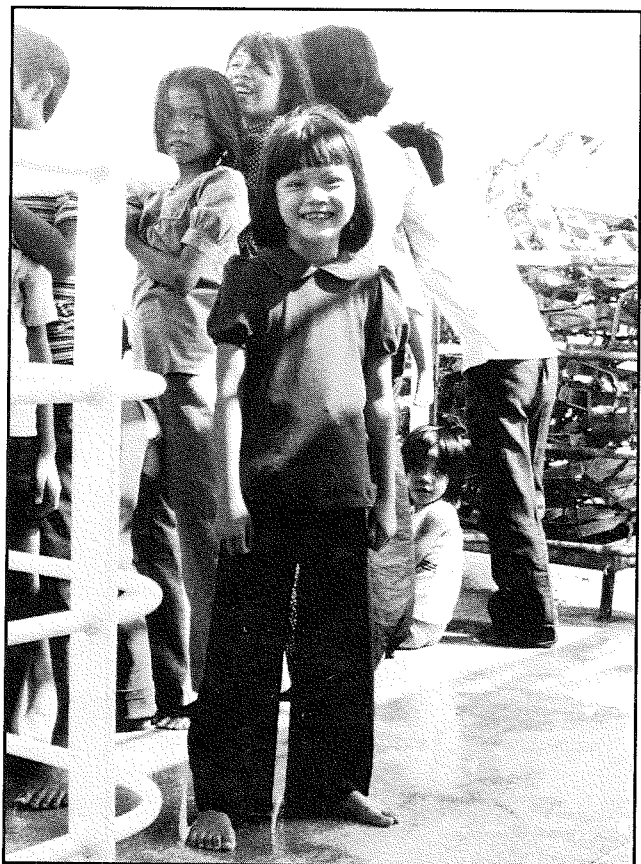
Charley and I roughed out Official Log entries and decided who should be notified. We decided to send copies of the Log entries to all concerned. We notified the Hong Kong, Singapore, and Oakland APL offices, and the State Department in Singapore by radio; the others by courier mail from Singapore (see copy of Log entry).

That evening, Jon, Charley, and Nguyen Thi Thu made up our passenger list. This included names, sex, age, occupation, and, in so far as possible, relationships. Nguyen Thi Thu stated, "We came from Tuy Hoa, Vietnam." That was about 330 miles from where we sighted them. She said, "We had fuel left, and a little food, but we were almost out of water." She said, "We used a lot of water keeping the babies clean." She also told Jon that nineteen ships had passed them by. So much for International Law and Tradition.

These people were cooperative. As indeed, why wouldn't they be? When we brought them on board they were pretty bedraggled. The Chief Engineer rigged a freshwater hose for their use on the boat deck. They took baths and washed clothes. All appeared to be in good health.

The next day, Nguyen Thi Thu asked the Chief Mate if she could talk to me. Jon brought her up to my office. Thi Thu thanked us profusely. She said, "You saved our lives." She told us then that her husband had managed to get out of Vietnam some months before. He was now in Australia. She asked to send him a radio message and offered to pay for it with Vietnamese money. I told Jon to get the Purser to help her with the message. Vietnamese money was of less value to us than Confederate money, but I agreed to send the message.

I will never fully understand the enigma of the Boat People. These were not the battered, starving



This little character was not at all camera shy

Courtesy Captain Gellerman

victims of the holocaust. They were smiling, well-fed people; yet they risked their lives and the lives of the children to leave Vietnam. I asked Thi Thu: "Why were you willing to take a chance in a small boat during the typhoon season? Did the Vietnamese Government hurt you in any way?"

She answered, "The Government did not hurt us, but because we have cooperated with the old Thieu (South Vietnamese) Government, we are considered unreliable. Our children are not allowed to go to good schools." In effect, the children were sentenced to lives of menial labor. This may explain, in part, why so many of the Boat People were children.

PRESIDENT MADISON arrived at Horsburg Light (entrance to Singapore Strait) early on the morning of July 16, 1982. PRESIDENT MADISON was met by an escort of patrol craft and military helicopters. I believe the escort was there to prevent the Boat People from trying to escape over the side. We proceeded to our usual berth, and

commenced cargo operations. Ordinarily, we would have gone to the quarantine anchorage to await officials.

The Boat People were interviewed by Singapore Immigration Officials, and representatives of the United Nations Department for Refugees. The Boat People left the vessel that afternoon and were taken away by bus.

On our second call Singapore, that voyage, we received a letter from UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees).

In discussions with other mariners, I have heard the following opinion:

The Boat People are not truly in distress. They are out there of their own free will. They are hitch-hiking at sea. You may pick them up or leave them, at your own discretion. This opinion has some validity. For my part, I would not have slept well had I left them in our wake.



In a safe haven

Courtesy Captain Gellerman

copy of log entry

AMERICAN PRESIDENT LINES, LTD.
SS PRESIDENT MADISON, VOY#83

VIETNAMESE REFUGEES

LOCATION AT SEA

Lat 17° - 02' N Long 113° - 13.7' E
BOAT SIGHTED AT 1242 HOURS, JULY 13th 1982 COMPLETE
BOARDING TO VESSEL OF 36 REFUGEES AT 1342 HOURS

ORIGIN

CLAIMED TO HAVE COME FROM TUY HOA
LEAVING THERE AT 2000 HOURS - JULY 9th 1982

REFUGEE BREAKDOWN

ADULT MALES 11, ADULT FEMALES 5 AND
20 CHILDREN OF WHICH 2 ARE INFANTS. TOTAL 36.

VESSEL'S LOCATION OF REFUGEES

HOUSED IN FWD SECTION OF DRY STORES #7 WITH
THE USE OF THE DECK AREA ON THAT DECK.

TO HAVE ACCESS TO USE OF THE DECK STEVEDORE
LAVATORY TRANSITING BETWEEN THERE AND THEIR
ASSIGNED DECK ONLY.

PREPARED FOOD TO BE PICKED UP FROM
CHIEF STEWARD AND DIRTY DISHES AND
LEFTOVERS RETURNED TO CHIEF STEWARD.

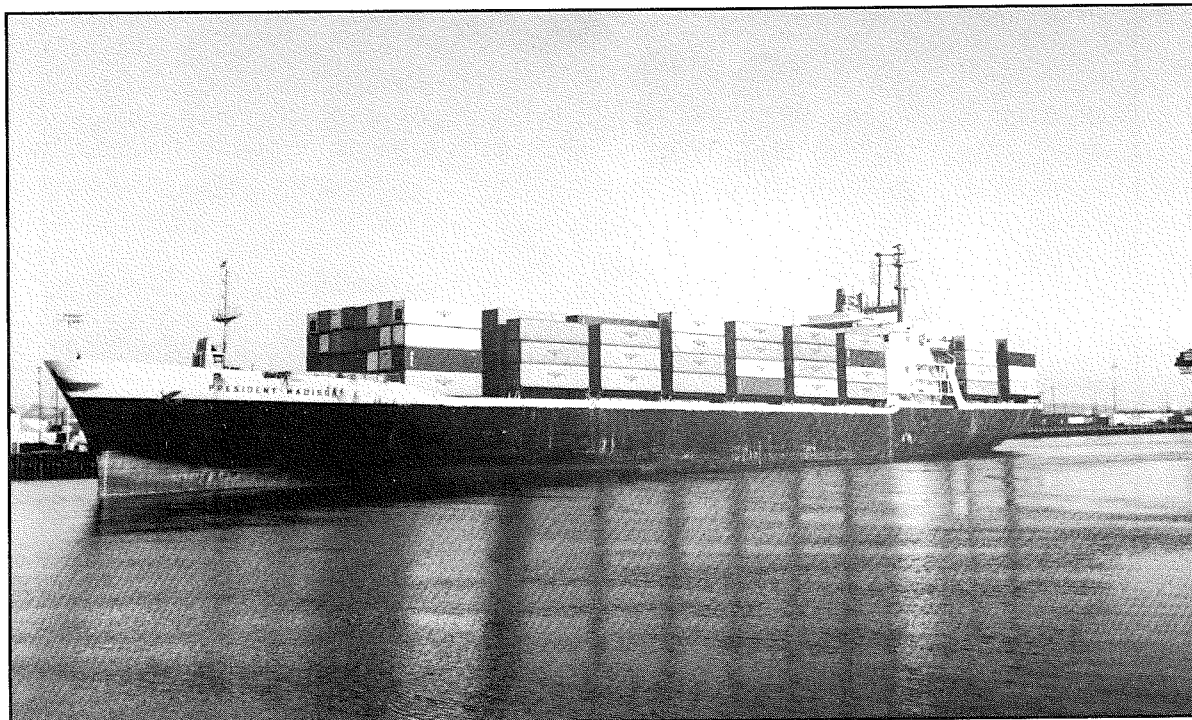
HEALTH STATUS

ALL TO BE FOUND IN GENERAL GOOD HEALTH
CONDITION. SEVERAL WERE TREATED WITH SMALL
SKIN BURNS APPARENTLY RECEIVED FROM DIESEL
ENGINE EXHAUST ON THEIR BOAT.

FRESH WATER ACCESS ON DECK FOR WASHING AND
CLEANING PURPOSES.

COMMUNICATION

VERY DIFFICULT WITH ONLY ONE ADULT WOMAN
WHO COULD UNDERSTAND A MINIMUM OF ENGLISH.
SHE COULD UNDERSTAND ENOUGH TO PASS ON
INSTRUCTIONS TO THE REST OF THE GROUP.



The S. S. PRESIDENT MADISON, of American President Lines

Courtesy Captain Gellerman



The Vietnamese boat was set adrift after the rescue

Courtesy Captain Gellerman



A temporary home aboard the PRESIDENT MADISON

Courtesy Captain Gellerman

NO.	NAME	SEX	AGE	OCCUPATION	RELATIONS
1.	NGUYEN THI THU	F	26	TEACHER	
2.	NGUYEN THI TUONG THANH	F	1	INFANT	MRS THU'S DAUGHTER
3.	NGUYEN THI TRONG THUY	F	17	STUDENT	-do- SISTER IN LAW
4.	VO THI PHUC	F	28	HOUSEWIFE	-do- AUNT
5.	NGUYEN LA	M	32	LT. NAVY BEFORE 1975	HUSBAND - MRS. PHUC
6.	NGUYEN VAN DONG	M	32	FISHERMAN	
7.	NGUYEN VAN HAI	M	12	STUDENT	MR. DONG'S SON
8.	NGUYEN VAN DUNC	M	10	STUDENT	MR. DONG'S SON
9.	NGUYEN THI KIEU CANH	F	8	STUDENT	MR. DONG'S DAUGHTER
10.	NGUYEN QUOC HUY	M	7	STUDENT	MR. DONG'S SON
11.	NGUYEN DU	M	26	FISHERMAN	MR. DONG'S BROTHER IN LAW
12.	NGUYEN THANH THY	M	14	STUDENT	MR. DONG'S NEPHEW
13.	NGUYEN THANH AN	M	13	STUDENT	MR. DONG'S NEPHEW
14.	NGUYEN THANH NINH	M	10	STUDENT	MR. DONG'S NEPHEW
15.	HO XUAN DANH	M	26	TEACHER	
16.	NGUYEN THI AN	F	23	TEACHER	MR. DANH'S WIFE
17.	HO NGUYEN THAI VAN	M	1	INFANT	MR. DANH'S SON
18.	NGUYEN THI CHUYEN	F	13	STUDENT	MR. DANH'S SISTER IN LAW
19.	NGUYEN TAN HUNG	M	11	STUDENT	MR. DANH'S BROTHER INLAW
20.	NGUYEN VAN BA	M	29	TEACHER	
21.	NGUYEN THI OANH	F	20	STUDENT	MR. BA'S SISTER
22.	NGUYEN THI MINH NGUYET	F	17	STUDENT	MR. BA'S SISTER
23.	NGUYEN THI HUYEN	F	15	STUDENT	MR. BA'S SISTER
24.	NGUYEN VAN BANG	M	12	STUDENT	MR. BA'S BROTHER
25.	DOAN THONC HY	M	9	STUDENT	MR. BA'S NEPHEW
26.	DOAN QUE KHUONG	F	8	STUDENT	MR. BA'S NEPHEW (sic)
27.	NGO QUOC KHANH	M	14	STUDENT	MR. BA'S NEPHEW
28.	NGO THI DIEM KIEU	F	15	STUDENT	MR. BA'S NEPHEW (sic)
29.	DOAN VAN HAI	M	32	DRIVER	MR. BA'S COUSIN
30.	NGUYEN VAN HUE	M	17	STUDENT	MR. BA'S COUSIN
31.	LUONG THI LIEN	F	27	HOUSEWIFE	MR. BA'S COUSIN
32.	DAO VAN BINH	M	22	WHEEL MAKER	
33.	NGUYEN NGOC PHICH	M	22	DRIVER	
34.	NGUYEN THANH XIAN	M	19	WELDER	
35.	VU TIEN CUONG	M	19	WELDER	
36.	HOANG NHA	M	19	METAL WORKER	