

**USAF Southeast Asia Monograph Series
Volume IV
Monograph 6**

**LAST FLIGHT
FROM
SAIGON**



Last Flight from Saigon
Lavalle A. J. C.

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**USAF Southeast Asia Monograph Series
Volume IV
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**Volume Edited by:
Lt. Col. A.J.C. Lavalle**



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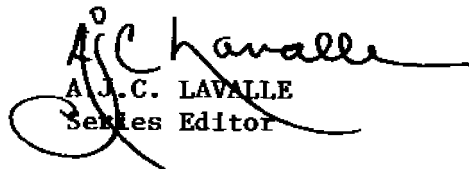
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Foreword

The Southeast Asia Monograph Series is designed and dedicated to telling the story of USAF's participation in the Vietnam War. This monograph, the sixth in the Series, adds another exciting chapter to our continuing effort to bring forth and highlight the dedication, courage, and professionalism of the U.S. airman in combat. The primary intent of this series is to emphasize and dramatize the human aspects of this long and frustrating struggle, straying somewhat away from the cold hard statistics of "tons of bombs dropped" and "structures destroyed," etc., frequently the headliners in historical presentations.

"Last Flight From Saigon" is an exciting and moving account of how all our Services, as well as several civilian agencies, pulled together to pull-off the largest aerial evacuation in history—what many have referred to as a modern day Dunkirk. The three authors, intimately involved with the evacuation from beginning to end, have carefully pieced together an amazing story of courage, determination and American ingenuity. Above all, it's a story about saving lives; one that is seldom told in times of war. All too often, critics of armed conflict make their targets out to be something less than human, bent on death and destruction. One need only study the enormity of the effort and cost that went into the "evacuation of Saigon," and the resultant thousands of lives that were saved, to realize that the American fighting man is just as capable, and more eager, to save lives than he is in having to wage war.

The reader can help tell this story by sharing this book with his friends.


A.J.C. LAVALLEY
Series Editor

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The authors acknowledge Colonel Howard K. Sanders, faculty advisor on this project, for his valuable assistance during the preparation of the manuscript. His expertise, calm personality, and encouragement kept us on track when we needed it most.

MONOGRAPH 6

Last Flight From Saigon

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**Monograph Edited by
Lt Col David R. Mets**

Preface

On the last two days in April 1975, Operation FREQUENT WIND, the evacuation of Vietnam, ended a twenty-year agony for the United States. A trial for America was done. The last 45 days of her presence in South Vietnam may seem almost insignificant compared to the previous decades of pain. But, in a continuous effort under ever-increasing pressure, the US Embassy in Saigon, and its Defense Attache Office (DAO) there, helped plan, prepare for, and ultimately conduct, the final evacuation from South Vietnam. Operation FREQUENT WIND extracted 130,000 people including: Vietnamese citizens, Third Country Nationals and US citizens—a truly important feat which will continue to affect the United States for some time to come.

Faced with hundreds of hard decisions, enormous logistical requirements, continuous security problems, and the threat of enemy military action, American civilians and military men conducted an efficient evacuation. Graham Martin, the last US Ambassador to South Vietnam, and the man in overall charge of the evacuation, said that in the long run the extraction at Saigon would surely be judged as "a hell of a good job."

On the evening of 29 April 1975, USAF Lieutenant Colonels Arthur E. Lachr and John F. Hilgenberg jumped off CH-53 helicopters onto the deck of the *USS Midway*, lying 30 miles off the coast of South Vietnam near Vung Tau. For the first time in several weeks, each breathed a huge sigh of relief; for them, the evacuation of Saigon—FREQUENT WIND—was finally over.

Over 45 minutes earlier, both had embarked on separate CH-53s in the tennis court helicopter landing zone adjacent to the Defense Attache Office on Tan Son Nhut (TSN) Air Base. From the Defense Attache office building (formerly MACV Headquarters), huge clouds of black smoke could be seen rising from the impact of intermittent rocket and artillery shells on the main air base—barely a quarter mile away. Several blocks to the east, a huge fireball erupted in the

vicinity of the Pacific Architects and Engineers' warehouse, the building of a contractor who maintained the last of the US facilities in Vietnam. The blaze cast an eerie, flickering light on the whole area—where over 20 years of American effort was coming to an end.

In Nakhon Phanom (NKP) Thailand, 450 miles away, Air Force Lt Colonel Thomas G. Tobin, who was pulled from the Saigon office on 17 April to advise and coordinate planning and execution of the evacuation at the United States Support Advisory Group (USSAG-7th Air Force), wondered just what had happened to his friends. In the last hours, communications between Nakhon Phanom, Saigon, Hawaii, and Washington had been intermittent, and reports could not confirm just who or how many got out.

In the days following the evacuation, the three officers met in Hawaii to help prepare the final assessment of the US effort in South Vietnam. They had time to reflect on why the Republic of Vietnam disintegrated, but also, on how the evacuation of Saigon succeeded—despite what appeared to be very difficult odds. Rejoined again at the Air War College in Alabama, the three officers decided to write the story of the last days of the Thieu regime and of the American evacuation. Their account of the air escape from the falling city is filled with examples of determination, fear, confusion, and—most significantly—the professionalism of those who participated.

This story has a dual theme, the parts of which are inseparable. It weaves together the tremendous efforts of the people on the ground with the inherent speed and flexibility of air power, which made the whole escape possible. It should become obvious to the reader that both parts were absolutely necessary to success.

Air power was a pervasive element of the American effort to keep South Vietnam free. It was used both against the Viet Cong (VC) and the conventional North Vietnamese Army forces (NVA) who infiltrated the south, and military targets in North Vietnam. Most of the roles of air power were used: from reconnaissance, close air support, and airlift in the south, to interdiction along the Ho Chi Minh Trail and other North Vietnamese lines of communication and in the north. Air power helped defeat the massive North Vietnamese Army invasion of 1972; in the Linebacker II raids in December of the same year it was used against the enemy heartland, where it was widely acclaimed as the prime factor which forced Hanoi back to the negotiating table. Presidential Special Assistant Henry Kissinger remarked on the role of Linebacker II during a January 1973 press conference:

I was asked in October whether the bombing or mining of May 8 brought about the breakthrough in October, and I said then I did not want to speculate on North Vietnamese motives. I have too much trouble analyzing our own . . .

I will give the same answer to your question, but I will say that there was a deadlock which was described in the middle of December, and there was a rapid movement when negotiations resumed on a technical level on January 3 and on the substantive level of January 8. These facts have to be analyzed by each person by himself . . .

Joseph Alsop, in the *Washington Post* of 24 January 1973, analyzed the facts in this way:

There is no question at all that the renewed bombing got the President what he was aiming for. Significantly, Hanoi had never broken off communications with Washington, even when the bombing was at its worst. In the end, a message came from Hanoi to the President, indicating that negotiations would be resumed on an acceptable and serious basis.

Thus, to a large extent, the US had come to Vietnam by air and had sustained her own forces and those of her allies by air support. Now, in the end, she left by air in the largest aerial evacuation in history. This operation, first code named *TALON VISE* and then *FREQUENT WIND*, was a remarkable success. The story deserves to be told. In spite of the disappointments of the war as a whole, the authors believe history will substantiate the idea that the evacuation of Vietnam was one of America's great aerial accomplishments.

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Chapter I. Handwriting on the Wall: Politics Economics, Logistics, 1973–1974

On 28 January 1973, the Paris Ceasefire Agreement for ending the war in Vietnam was signed. That date is chosen as the starting point for the drama of *FREQUENT WIND*, which culminated early on the morning of 30 April 1975.

Looking back at the US involvement in the Vietnam War, one could give many reasons why it ended as it did, and most reasons probably contributed in one way or another. One of the key decisions which affected the outcome was the pronouncement of the Nixon Doctrine on Guam in July 1969. In his statement of US Foreign Policy for the 1970s, President Nixon outlined the guidelines of partnership, strength, and willingness to negotiate. His central thesis was that the US would participate in the defense and development of friends and allies, but that:

America cannot and will not. . .conceive all plans. . .design all programs. . .execute all the decisions. . .and undertake all the defense of the free nations of the world. We will help where it makes a real difference and is considered in our interest.

By the spring of 1972, most American ground forces had departed South Vietnam. This was in compliance with President Nixon's plan of Vietnamization, whereby the Vietnamese would eventually take over all the fighting to preserve their own country. The threat of American air power held the shaky Vietnamization program together, buying time for the South Vietnamese to build their strength. The North Vietnamese Easter Offensive of 1972 was beaten back, largely through the massive use of US aerial firepower—including both Operation Linebacker I, the heavy bombing of North Vietnamese supply routes, and the direct air support of the South Vietnamese Army. Ceasefire negotiations between Dr. Henry Kissinger and the

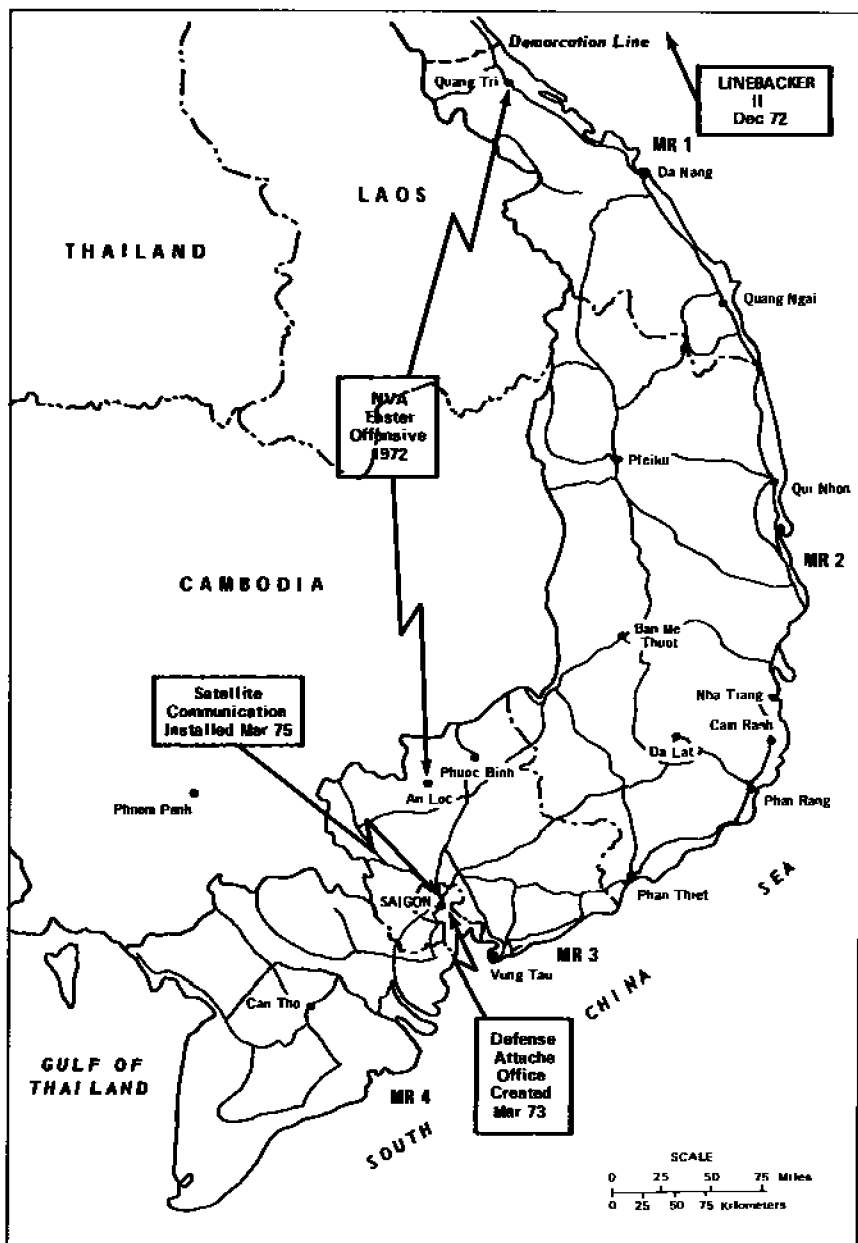


Figure 1. South Vietnam, April 1975.

North Vietnamese seemed to be making progress in the fall of 1972, only to bog down however, in mid-December.

Operation Linebacker II, the massive aerial attack on the North Vietnamese heartland, helped convince the North Vietnamese that the US would continue to support the Thieu regime in the Republic of Vietnam, and may well have forced the North Vietnamese back to ceasefire negotiations in January 1973. The result was what the US, on 28 January 1973, called "peace with honor" for America, the starting point for this story.

In this era of "peace" was born the Defense Attache Office, Vietnam (figure 2). Conceived in October 1972, the Defense Attache Office (DAO) was located in the old Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) headquarters building on Tan Son Nhut Airport, on the north edge of Saigon—about a 15 minute auto trip from downtown Saigon. The US Joint Chiefs of Staff provided preliminary guidance for the creation of the DAO and instructed MACV to establish in coordination with the American Embassy, a Defense Attache Office of not more than 50 military spaces to be fully operational on an anticipated ceasefire date plus 60 days, and to arrange for necessary in-country management, of continued resupply, local maintenance, and contractor support for Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces.

Forty days after the activation of the DAO the JCS approved the final manning tables providing for 50 military and 1,200 US civilian



Figure 2. Defense Attache Office, Tan Son Nhut AB, Saigon (Formerly MACV Headquarters).

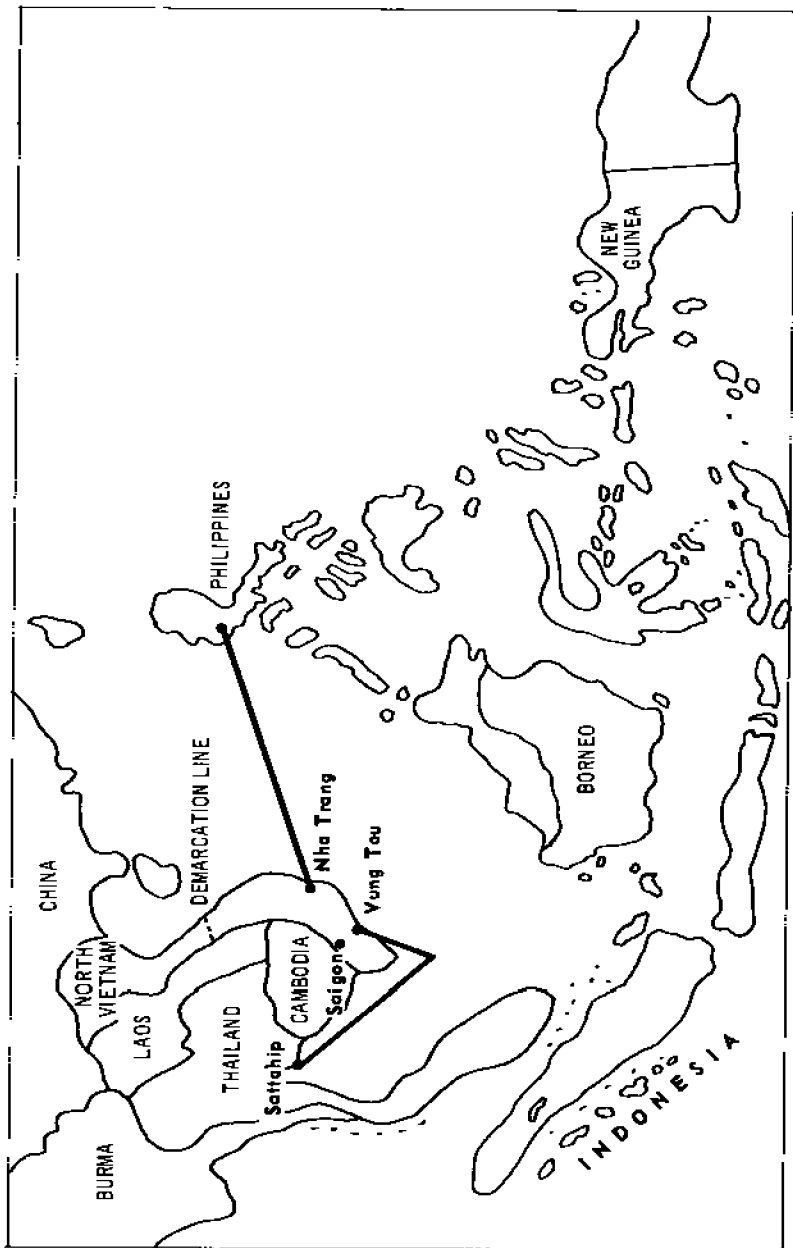


Figure 3. Underwater Communications Cables.

spaces. With an added authorization of 3,500 Vietnamese spaces, the DAO became an organization of 4,750 individuals. On 29 March 1973, with the inactivation of MACV, the US officially ended its military combat role in Vietnam. A total of 209 military personnel remained in South Vietnam (50 officers from all services at the Defense Attache Office and 159 Marine guards assigned to the Saigon Embassy and the four Consul General offices at Da Nang, Nha Trang, Bien Hoa, and Can Tho). The Marines provided security services in the four Military Regions of the country. From its origin, the DAO was in a continual process of reducing manning. Contractor personnel were being cut at an even greater rate than US government employees. By the end of 1974, reductions-in-force lowered the total DAO strength to 3,900 employees (50 military officers, 850 US civilians, and 3,000 Vietnamese).

From the outset, the command structure of the Defense Attache Office was unique, primarily because of its active role of monitoring South Vietnamese military activities. The first Defense Attache for the new DAO was Major General John E. Murray, USA, who moved from his former job as Director of MACV Logistics to the position of Attache. He was the ranking American military officer in Vietnam.

General Murray had two bosses. One was the American Ambassador, Graham A. Martin, who had taken office in July 1973. Ambassador Martin directed all in-country political, economic, and psychosocial aspects of the American mission. On the military side, General Murray worked for the Commander, US Support Activities Group-7th Air Force at Nakhon Phanom (NKP), Thailand. Later, he reported directly to the Commander-in-Chief, Pacific (CINCPAC) in Hawaii. Doubtless, this arrangement violated the principle of "unity of command."

The Attache published Quarterly Assessments* describing the situation in Vietnam. In his first Assessment, dated 30 June 1973, General Murray pointed out some changes created by the departure of US Advisors upon whom the Vietnamese had relied. After claiming that the Attache could not submit a more objective report because his staff was not as personally involved in the subject as had been the advisors, he went on to say that the source data coming from the Vietnamese might not be completely reliable because it

*Each Assessment provided a thorough report of activities and conditions including intelligence reports from US Army, Air Force, and Navy divisions, training, the status of the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces and, most important, how US Security Assistance (aid) funds were spent. The Attache prepared his personal synopsis of each period as a foreword to the assessment. These documents, on file at many military libraries, provide a comprehensive summary of activities in the RVN from January 1973 to 30 April 1975 and may prove valuable to researchers who desire detailed data on this period of US involvement in Vietnam. Presently, they are classified.

could no longer be validated through the advisor system. He added that Vietnamese staff personnel were often startled by US interest in military details and expressed chagrin at Vietnamese lack of concern. He complained about the South Vietnamese lack of a sense of urgency, inaccurate reporting, and inability to see the need for timely actions and responses.

On 30 September 1973, General Murray updated his previous report with a stern warning of an enemy logistical buildup which lacked only the requisite manpower to make it a serious threat of a major, country-wide offensive. At the same time, he lamented the incompleteness of the "Vietnamization Program." He was especially disturbed about the Vietnamese Air Force. Training was incomplete, operational readiness was not satisfactory, the airlift record was disappointing, and most of the bombing was being done from altitudes of 10,000 feet and higher—not only reducing accuracy but also causing interservice bitterness.

General Murray continued as Defense Attache until the summer of 1974, never changing the general tone of his quarterly reports. The enemy buildup continued, Vietnamization lagged in several vital areas, and the economy that supported the South Vietnamese Government, though more resilient than might have been expected, was nevertheless stricken with a bad case of inflation. He closed his tour with a pessimistic report maintaining that the contest could be won but only with the strong materiel support from the US Congress and taxpayers.

In August of 1974, Major General Homer D. Smith, USA, replaced General Murray. He, too, was a logistician, as materiel deficiencies were deemed to be *one of the weakest areas of the South Vietnamese Armed Forces*. From the outset, General Smith was plagued with the same problems faced by his predecessor, and his reports were not much different from those cited earlier. The requirements for the fiscal year just begun had been established as \$1.4 billion. The appropriation, when it finally emerged in September 1974, had been cut down to half that figure. Smith was soon reporting that some of the earlier pessimistic predictions of the effects of reduced funding were now coming true. He complained that though the spirit of the South Vietnamese remained high (all things considered) the want of money had deprived them of most of their offensive capability. Thus, the initiative had been thrust into the hands of the North Vietnamese, and the outlook was grim indeed unless new material aid was soon forthcoming. By the end of the year, the Communists were beginning to take advantage of the weaknesses Smith cited by probing around Phouc Binh—the beginning of the last battle.

If the full weight of American economic power could not be deployed to stem the onslaught, could military power be used? Many thought that the Ceasefire of January 1973 carried at least an

implied commitment to reintroduce US airpower to the fighting if the Communists violated their agreement.

There were some remnants of American airpower in Southeast Asia: the B-52s and their tankers were still at U Tapao, and F-4s, A-7s, AC-130s and F-111As were poised at the other Thai bases—though a decision had already been made to remove them during Fiscal Year 1976.

Fortunately, the South Vietnamese did not know of that decision. Rather, the mere presence of American airpower, close by in Thailand, gave them hope. Regardless of where the authors travelled in-country or to whom they talked, military or civilian, the typical questions usually came out: "When will the Americans return with their airplanes to stop the Viet Cong (VC) and the North Vietnamese Army? When will the B-52s come back?" It wasn't a question of "will they return?" it was "when?" Most Vietnamese talked to thought that the US would help them when they needed it. It was a difficult task to sidestep such questions since the possibility of a resumption of American bombing was slim, if not nonexistent.

In addition to the overwhelming confidence of the South Vietnamese that the US would return, they were fully convinced that Saigon was invincible. If all else failed, one could make it to the "Jerusalem" of South Vietnam and be safe. This was a false but consistent illusion.

The factors noted above plus many more led Americans serving in South Vietnam in December 1974 to think the unthinkable—a mass evacuation of Americans from Vietnam was becoming a very real possibility. To most of the American military in Saigon, evacuation was a foregone conclusion. It was not a matter of "if," it was a matter of "when." Clearly 1975 looked like a bad year!

Plans and Preparations for the Inevitable

In any venture, especially in a strange environment, common prudence dictates that one at least give some general thought to possible actions if the worst should occur. By the beginning of 1975, the warning signals were loud and clear. Though few thought the collapse would be so sudden, most were sure that it would come in the not-too-distant future. Thus, there was renewed interest in planning for the worst. How were we to remove a considerable number of Americans and Third Country Nationals from danger? How many South Vietnamese lives were in jeopardy? What could we do to bring them to safety? Of course, a plan to achieve these things was prepared quite some time before the final crisis. Although the evacuation did not much resemble the original plan, it is nevertheless necessary to discuss briefly the planning process to give the reader a better grasp of the background to the crisis.

As the hurried evacuation of the American Embassy in Poland before Hitler's 1939 onslaught showed, the maintenance of an evacuation plan has many precedents and has by now become a standard operating procedure. The work done on TALON VISE (original code name of the evacuation plan, later changed to FREQUENT WIND) during 1974 and 1975 was not so much planning as it was updating an existing plan in a rapidly changing situation. TALON VISE-FREQUENT WIND was a military contingency plan (USSAG/7AF) developed at the request of the U.S. Ambassador for the evacuation of personnel from the Republic of Vietnam. Many other factors, however, complicated the Ambassador's work on the plan. For some time force levels had been changing in Southeast Asia and all over the Western Pacific, and this called for changes in the evacuation arrangements. It was difficult to determine the exact numbers to be evacuated. By the beginning of 1975, the planners had a fairly stable figure of 8,000 Americans and Third Country Nationals, but there never was a firm figure for the number of Vietnamese to be carried out. Estimates varied from 1,500 to 1,000,000 Vietnamese who had been so closely associated with the US that their lives would be endangered under a Communist regime. An extremely unstable personnel situation had been the rule among the allied forces for a long time and seemed certain to continue. To further complicate the situation, there was no reliable ground system of communications for alerting and gathering up individuals for evacuation. Only the radio offered any hope of achieving that part of the job. In the end, then, not only was the task monumental, but it was nearly impossible to even define it.

What resources were available for accomplishing the job? Because of its speed, flexibility, and relative security, airlift was thought to be the most desirable mode of evacuation. Movement on the ground was feasible in only a very few areas of Vietnam. Sealift was practical, but the line of communications down the Saigon River to the sea was vulnerable to interdiction from the banks of the stream. The problem with airlift was that the main terminal, Tan Son Nhut airport, was in the midst of the congested area of the capital, and no one could foresee what the attitude of the local population would be during the final withdrawal. It was known that enemy SA-7* missiles were available in the region and that fixed-wing aircraft operating in and out of Tan Son Nhut would be highly vulnerable to such weapons. Moreover, USAF airlift planes and personnel had long since been withdrawn from South Vietnam, and the only reliable airlift available in the country was Air America. The helicopters and smaller aircraft of this company were invaluable for removing people from remote

*SA-7: Hand-held, shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missile.

locations, but they did not have the capacity or the range to carry the evacuees away from Vietnam. Of course, the Military Airlift Command could schedule its own C-141s and C-5s as well as the airliners of the contract carriers into Tan Son Nhut for the rescue. Some of these aircraft were available on very short order from places in the Western Pacific, and others could be brought in from the United States with remarkably little delay. Then too, there was a considerable fleet of C-130s stationed in the Philippines only 1,000 miles away from the scene. Thus, assuming that the terminal at Tan Son Nhut would be secure, a sizable number of airlift aircraft could be made available for the task.

However, if the security of the airfield degenerated to the point where large, fixed-wing aircraft could no longer safely land and take off, another option was still available—helicopters. Some Air America helicopters could be used, but many more were available on the Navy's carriers and could be flown to and from Saigon by their Marine pilots.

What resources were available for establishing and maintaining the security of the evacuation? USAF bases in Thailand, only a few hundred miles away, still had about 30,000 people. These bases could supply daytime close air support with their A-7s, F-4s, F-111s, and OV-10s. All through the night, even during adverse weather, the Thailand-based AC-130s could cover the withdrawal with their 105 mm cannon and electronic sensing devices. They could, if required, also supply reconnaissance, airborne command and control, communications relay, rescue assistance, and Forward Air Controller services. Under certain conditions, air support might be available from the Vietnamese Air Force, and of course, significant tactical aircraft were available on the aircraft carriers that the Navy had deployed to the area. Finally, under certain circumstances, the B-52s at U-Tapao and Guam, or various tactical aircraft in the United States itself could be called to the scene.

The TALON VISE plan, as it stood in the winter of 1974-75, was logical enough, but quite complex. The officer in charge of its execution was to be the United States Ambassador to the Republic of Vietnam. He had four options:

OPTION 1—Evacuation by commercial airlift from Tan Son Nhut (and other Vietnamese airports as required—without any Department of Defense participation).

OPTION 2—Evacuation by military airlift from Tan Son Nhut or whatever other airports were required.

OPTION 3—Evacuation by sealift from the port serving Saigon.

OPTION 4—Evacuation by helicopter to ships of the US Navy standing by offshore.

If the situation demanded it, for any of the last three options, especially for Option 4, a ground security force of US Marines could

be brought in by helicopter for the protection of the airfield or the helicopter landing zones. These Marines would be from the Okinawa force and would be based on the helicopter carriers and other ships cruising offshore. The TALON VISE-FREQUENT WIND plans also provided for tactical air support from the Thailand-based U.S. Air Force and the USN carriers. The Ambassador would exercise complete command and control for Option 1, but the function could be passed on to the Commander of US Support Activities Group-7th AF at Nakhon Phanom AB, Thailand, for any of the other options.

Some of the tasks which fell to the Defense Attache's Office in connection with the TALON VISE-FREQUENT WIND plan during the early months of 1975 were the updating of the intelligence on the helicopter landing zones and the preparation of the sealift and airlift annexes to the plan. Though photographs of the landing areas had been available for some time, new construction and the changing military situation made it imperative that new ones be supplied frequently to the helicopter units—especially since most of the pilots in these units had not flown in Vietnam before. The Defense Attache's Office, therefore, went to some length to secure new photos of nearly a hundred of the helicopter landing zones all over Vietnam and to distribute them to the many helicopter and close air support units involved in the plan. As for the airlift and sealift annexes, the situation was changing so rapidly that there was little hope that any operation could be conducted strictly according to a preconceived schedule. All the same, it was necessary to constantly work on these arrangements so that they would be as close to reality as possible when the final hour came.

Evacuation plans are more or less routine for many American Embassies. TALON VISE-FREQUENT WIND planning was no exception. The document had been built up over the years, and it was a good one. It covered many of the possible contingencies, and though it was very complex, it was understandable to the people for whom it was produced. Few of the planners who contributed to the plan over the years would have expected that the actual operation would go in the way dictated by the plan. The situation was so very fluid that no amount of foresight could have covered all of the angles. For all of that, the planning process was vital to the success of FREQUENT WIND. It caused all of the commanders and staffs involved to take a preliminary look at the situation and to give some thought to the problems their units might face in the crisis. The mental conditioning gave the responsible officials an invaluable background upon which to base their solutions for the new problems which arose from unforeseen and unforeseeable events. One of the difficulties was foreseen by Colonel Gavin McCurdy of the Defense Attache's Office. The events of the winter and spring both in the



Figure 4. Heavy Equipment Began Clearing Helicopter Landing Zones on Tan Son Nhut Air Base in Early April as the Full Magnitude of the Retreat Became Apparent.

North and around Saigon convinced him that the command and control system as it then stood was inadequate. He set to work to repair the defects.

Command and Control

Having given some attention to the forces which were to be employed in TALON VISE-FREQUENT WIND and to the plans for their use, we will now turn to a brief look at the command and control structure that was to manage the operation and at the associated communications system.

One of the fundamental principles of war is that unity of command must be preserved. Almost as axiomatic, is the idea that one is very often compelled to violate one principle of war in order to implement another. The principle of mass or concentration, for example, is very often incompatible with the desire to achieve surprise. For all of that, there can hardly be any question that the idea of unity of command was violated in the case of the Defense Attache Office in Saigon. The Attache had four bosses. For political matters in Vietnam, he was directly subordinate to Ambassador Martin. His military superior was Lt General Burns, the Commander USSAG-7 AF located at Nakhon Phanom AB, Thailand. Often, General Burns was bypassed by Admiral Gayler, CINCPAC, who communicated directly with General Smith in Saigon. For logistical matters, General Smith's boss was the Secretary of Defense himself, acting through the Assistant Secretary for Logistics. In short, external guidance was often more than adequate.

Colonel McCurdy, USAF, when assigned to write the airlift annex to the TALON VISE plan, quickly saw that the supporting communications arrangement would not suffice for an operation of that magnitude. Most of the equipment for an effective system was on hand, as was the space for the establishment of a command center. The problem was to select the proper equipment and location and to get everything set up and ready for action. For the location, he chose the old MACV command bunker, which was highly secure and located quite close to the Defense Attache's Office. He drew up the general plans for the command post Evacuation Control Center, and then assigned the detailed work to Colonel E. H. Graham, USA, and Lieutenant Colonel R. Y. Schuette, also of the US Army.

The resulting communications system was impressive in many ways. It had elements dependent upon wire transmission, microwave systems, various UHF, VHF, and FM nets for the in-country operations and HF SSB systems for more distant communications. All of these facilities were married together in an efficient arrangement at the Evacuation Control Center. Still, some special vulnerabilities did

exist. The microwave link with all the northern locations was progressively put out of action as the Communists moved southward. The Communist capture of one station severed the microwave connection with Thailand, and through Thailand to the outside world. The wire links to out-of-country locations were dependent upon two cableheads: the one at Nha Trang which served the line to the Philippines and the other at Vung Tau which connected Vietnam with Sattahip, Thailand. The former was lost when the town fell in late March, and the latter was none too secure. A final weakness was that the telephone system in Saigon was not at all reliable and could not be used for alerting or controlling personnel living downtown.

In a stroke of remarkable foresight, the communications personnel of the Attache's Office submitted a request for a satellite communications unit. The equipment was airlifted directly to Tan Son Nhut from Hawaii and was ready for action on the 30th of March. It was located in a highly secure place readily accessible to the Attache Office personnel and completely independent of any additional surface communications hardware. Thus, the problems entailed in the losses of the microwave units and the cableheads were overcome. The solution to the problem of communications among the personnel in the city of Saigon was not readily solved. Some help was found by using a multitude of portable UHF and VHF radios, but they could never have been an effective substitute for a good telephone system.

In the last analysis, the communications system that would serve the evacuation was really quite good. It was fast, there were limited secure facilities for secret messages, and there was enough redundancy that its vulnerability to interdiction at an early stage was not too great. The command structure, from the point of view of unity of command, was not as good. Yet, it is hard to imagine what could have been done about it—given the immense importance of the whole affair to world and domestic politics, and the lack of time. Meanwhile, as the Defense Attache Office braced itself for the final evacuation, events to the north indicated that the crucial moment could not be far off.

Chapter II. An Agonizing Three Months: Deterioration, January through March 1973

The Year of the Cat (1975) dawned with a feeling of helplessness in South Vietnam. Despite the extensive equipment and training provided to the South Vietnamese Armed Forces over the years, particularly under the Vietnamization Program created in the early 1970s, the South Vietnamese found themselves in a continuously defensive posture. The reduction in US military assistance funds under the FY 1975 appropriations had complicated an already serious situation. North Vietnamese Army (NVA) strength was growing in manpower and war materials. Six North Vietnamese Army divisions hovered north of the Demilitarized Zone, ready to move out.

For a long time, things had been going from bad to worse for the Republic of Vietnam and the pace was quickening. Just prior to the Buddhist New Year, the North Vietnamese, for the first time, captured an entire province. With the fall of Song Be, Phouc Long Province came under their sway—hardly 50 miles from Saigon. To make matters worse, after a short lull, and a discouraging visit from a US Congressional Delegation, Pleiku went the way of Song Be. This was followed by a general panic that ultimately caused the fall of Quang Tri, Hue, and Da Nang—all of which set the stage for the final act of the tragedy. This chapter surveys these defeats as a background to that final act.

Before Christmas, the North Vietnamese Army had cut the ground line of communications to Phouc Binh Province. The Vietnamese Air Force tried to set up an air line of communications to the capital, Song Be, but the great Khe Sanh airlift of 1968 was not to be repeated. No longer were there US Marines to aid in the defense of the base. No longer were there hordes of USAF C-7s, C-123s, and C-130s to drop the materiel to the beleaguered defenders. The South Vietnamese Air Force had been losing aircraft all through

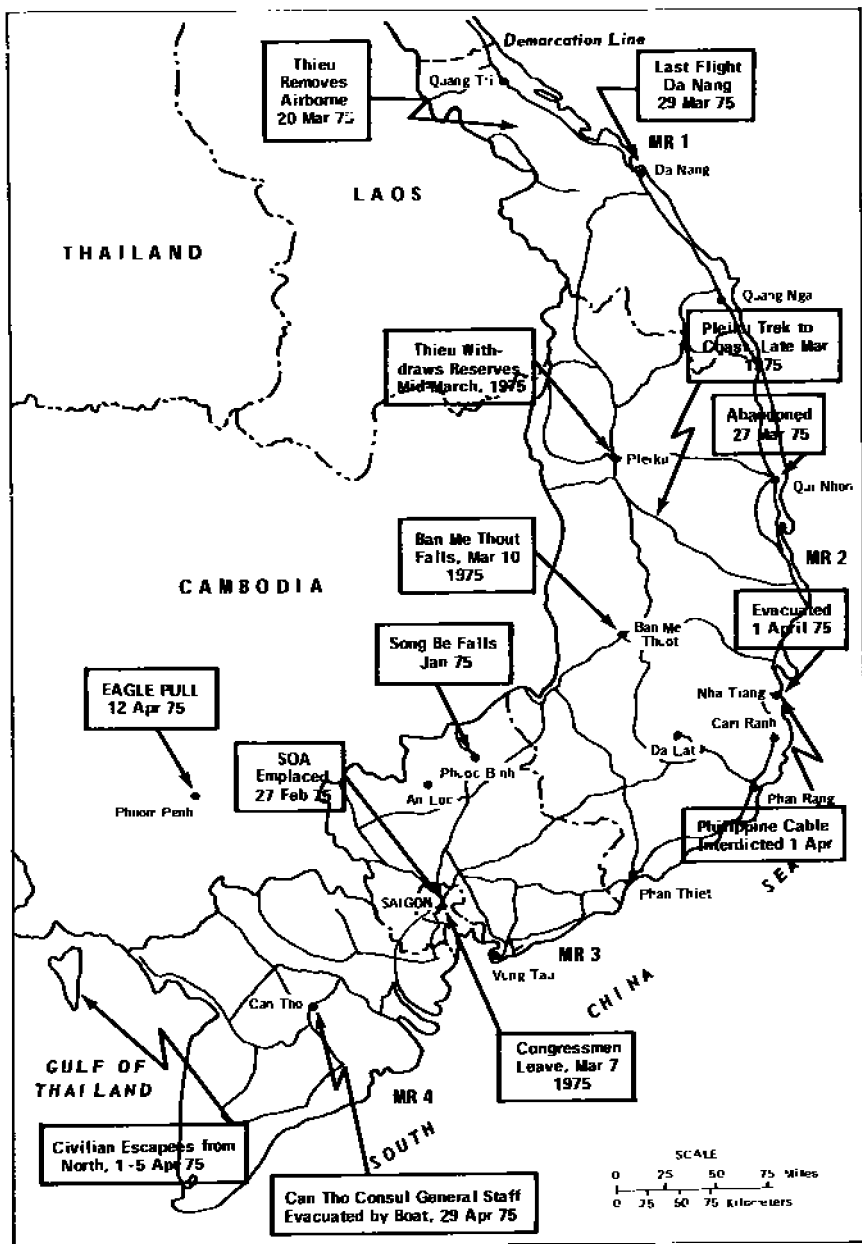


Figure 5. Deterioration, January-March 1975.

1974 and 1975, but the promised one-for-one replacement never fully materialized. Two South Vietnamese C-130s were lost in the futile attempt to resupply the garrison.

Phouc Long was neither a bread basket nor an arsenal. It did not contain any vast multitude of South Vietnamese patriots. Economically, it used more food than it produced. Yet, if there were any keystone to the arch of the South Vietnamese defense, it may have been that province. The Defense Attache, General Smith, claimed that its loss portended evil things for the future not because it was a tactical failure, but rather because it was a logistical defeat. The psychological aspects of this loss rang alarm bells not only in the capital at Saigon, but also at the gateway to the highlands at Pleiku and in all other towns to the north. If the US would not come forth with the economic aid necessary to save this province so close to the capital, what would make her move?

For a brief spell after the fall of Song Be, there was a lull. During the "breather" the political activity was intense. President Thieu sent a delegation to Washington. Ambassador Martin himself made the long journey to the US capital. The purpose of both missions was the same: to enter yet another plea for more materiel aid for South Vietnam. The new President, Gerald Ford, was very much in favor of an affirmative answer and the Congress had a moment of hesitation. It sent its investigating delegation to the scene, but when the Representatives came back, the answer was still no. The Congressional Delegation left Vietnam on 7 March 1975. The fighting resumed immediately, and on 10 March, Ban Me Thuot fell, adding greatly to the concern in the capital.

President Thieu's reserves around Saigon were much too thin. He decided to withdraw the South Vietnamese Army forces from the Central Highlands and put them into a reserve for the defense of the capital. At this point, the fog of war accelerated the collapse. The Major General who was to have executed an orderly withdrawal, merely packed up his staff and left the scene. He turned over his forces to a newly-promoted Brigadier General with little command experience. When all of this became known, a panic ensued. The soldiers of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, many of whom had their families with them in the highlands, began an exodus toward the coast. The column was joined by all sorts of people. The South Vietnamese Air Force, finding itself alone and unable to defend Pleiku AB, began an aerial procession out of the place with all flyable aircraft. The trek to the coast turned out to be one of the most tragic chapters of a tragic war. The North Vietnamese Army harried the retreating column all the way to the coast, and reportedly 30,000 to 40,000 lives were lost before the 15-day agony was over. Also lost was virtually a mountain of needed military supplies that had been left behind.

The story of the Ban Me Thuot and Pleiku losses had some serious implications for the immediate future. At Ban Me Thuot, several Vietnamese Air America workers had been executed by the North Vietnamese Army captors. News of the incident spread like wildfire. The blood baths predicted through the years seemed to be on the point of coming true. The abandonment of large stores of materiel around Pleiku, and the failure of the South Vietnamese Air Force to destroy these stores afterwards not only deprived the South Vietnamese forces of vital supplies, but did little to aid the pleas for help in the halls of the American Congress. The South Vietnamese Army proved unreliable in this incident, largely, it was said, because they had their families in the area and were therefore more concerned with the safety of their loved ones than they were in the performance of their duty—perhaps understandably so in view of the events which had transpired. At any rate, the whole attempt to evacuate the Central Highlands led first to a panic and then to a rout which in turn brought things to a head in Military Region I around Quang Tri, Hue, and Da Nang.

The debacle at Pleiku led more or less directly to the terror at Da Nang. The events in the Central Highlands did nothing to solve President Thieu's problem of insufficient effective reserves in Military Region III around Saigon. His next move, whatever its desirability for the capital district, was to have disastrous results in the North and compound the defeat in the Highlands. The Airborne Division was one of the best in the Da Nang area, and when the President ordered it south to the capital, the commander of Military Region I made every possible plea for its retention. Thieu persisted, and the troops moved out.

Reacting to the loss of his Airborne Division, the commander in Military Region I began shifting troops from the Quang Tri area back to Da Nang. Their departure served as a catalyst causing civilians from the area to flee southward. As they went through Hue, the trickle became a stream and then a torrent which turned Da Nang into a madhouse of a million extra panic-stricken people, all seeking escape to a haven further to the south. To further complicate the matter, considerable stocks of materiel in the region were being abandoned, although attempts were being made to bring some of it out to Da Nang. To add to the confusion, the exodus was also beginning from the southern side of Da Nang, as those defending Chu Lai and Quang Ngai hastened to the port to try to find a means of escape. When the last Americans left Hue on 23 March, the situation in Da Nang was pandemonium. In addition to the civilian refugees, tens of thousands of South Vietnamese army soldiers, armed and without any control, were milling about the town. Not only were the elements for serious trouble present, there was little chance left that the evacuation could be accomplished according to

the original plan. Meanwhile, the situation in Phnom Penh was reaching a climax almost simultaneously; unfortunately, many of the forces tasked for that evacuation (EAGLE PULL) also had roles to play in the execution of the TALON VISE-FREQUENT WIND plan.

On the 25th of March, the Consul General of Military Region I, Mr. Al Francis, ordered the evacuation of the Americans, some Third Country Nationals, and a few, selected Vietnamese who could be accommodated. On March the 25th, things went well enough, but the next day the panic began to take hold. On the evening of the 26th, for example, a World Airways Boeing 727 landed at Da Nang to bring out more people. As the manifested passengers attempted to board the aircraft, the plane was surrounded by a crowd. Vehicles were driven onto the ramp and parked all about the 727. All sorts of illegal persons crowded on board, making it impossible to stay within either the legal limits for emigration or those for aircraft loading. The event portended serious problems for the morrow. One of the elements that made the situation at Da Nang so dangerous was the thousands of armed South Vietnamese troops who were out of control, roaming through the city.

On the 27th, people of Da Nang used aircraft, helicopters, and ships in an attempt to flee. Some of the ships in the harbor had to move further out to sea to avoid being overcome by the hordes of small craft that were attempting to put their human cargoes aboard. Several of the Air America and World Airways pilots who flew into Da Nang on the 27th of March complained that their aircraft had almost been swamped by the sea of humans—that was the last big day of the airlift. Most of the people taken out by air were deposited in Saigon. The remnants of the Consul General's Staff were removed by sea on the next day. The *Pioneer Contender* left Da Nang with them late on the 28th, and arrived at Cam Ranh Bay midday on the 29th. Since tens of thousands had been left behind, Mr. Ed Daily, President of World Airways, decided to make one more attempt on the 29th to fly one of his 727s into the Da Nang airport to take refugees out. In the riot that ensued, his aircraft almost did not get off the ground. His crew was forced to take off on a taxiway, through the masses of refugees. It succeeded in getting back to Saigon in spite of severe damage, flying with gear down and partially split flaps* and carrying about 290 refugees. Most of these were South Vietnamese Army soldiers who forced their way into the plane. Some actually shot family members who resisted or stood in the way. At least seven refugees hung in the wheel wells of the 727, and were saved only by the fact that the landing gear retraction

*An extremely dangerous condition in which the landing flaps extend from one wing but not the other. This condition can cause severe control problems.

mechanism was jammed by the body of a soldier entangled during the 727's takeoff run.

In the North, once Da Nang had fallen, the enemy continued down the east coast, the major cities falling like dominoes. Nha Trang was overrun virtually without a shot being fired. There were very few lessons to be learned from the Da Nang experience that had not already been learned from the other incidents. In all instances it was found that crowd control is essential during an evacuation. Such control might be facilitated in some instances by using roof-top helicopter landing zones. In general, events had shown that the timing of an evacuation is crucial. If the decision comes too early, it may well precipitate the defeat and panic one is trying to avoid; if it comes too late, more personnel than necessary may be lost because of the inability to control crowds.

By the end of March 1975, things looked very black indeed in Saigon. The Central Highlands had fallen and so had the great airport and sea terminal at Da Nang. The US Congress had made it clear that there would be no additional emergency appropriations. The crisis in neighboring Cambodia was at its peak and competing with Saigon for American resources and attention.

CHAPTER III. HISTORY'S LARGEST AERIAL EVACUATION: Initial Efforts in Saigon 1-4 April 1975

The story of the final anguish of Saigon began on 1 April 1975. The previous chapters have described the planning efforts, the last minute improvements to the system for command and control, and the retreat from the northern cities which led up to the final withdrawal from Saigon. This chapter will concentrate on the first phases of the evacuation of the capital itself.

One result of the experiences at Pleiku, Da Nang, and all the other abandoned cities was that the reliability of South Vietnamese security forces was questionable. Thus, it was necessary for the Defense Attache's Office to revise its plan and now provide for its own defense on the ground. The time for thinning out US personnel in Saigon had come.

One of the first steps was to encourage dependents and those on an earlier-prepared nonessential personnel list to depart. Pressure was applied to those who had the smallest commitments in Vietnam (usually those with no family ties). This group became the first of the people departing under the "massive thinning out" concept. Several factors forced the early movement of the "nonessential, unattached" personnel and the dependents of mission employees. First, the Government of Vietnam still required passports and exit visas for any Vietnamese departing the country, whether dependents of US citizens or not. The official "paper" requirement forced extensive, bureaucratic red tape delays for Americans with Vietnamese dependents, a factor which plagued the entire evacuation. Additionally, the bureaucracy of the US Civil Service system, with all its built-in procedures and safeguards, posed a substantial obstacle to forcing US employees to leave the country. The Defense Attache's Office had previously instituted a reduction-in-force as part of a February 1975 reorganization, and many of the initial evacuees came

from this "RIF" pool. In addition, General Smith had requested and obtained exemption from certain Civil Service regulations and had gained authority to issue reduction-in-force notices to any employee without prior notification. This action eliminated some of the difficulties of the thinning-out process, though the time and effort required to accomplish such action in a deteriorating emergency situation raised valid questions about the use of the US Civil Service system in a combat theater.

Major Dale Hensley, a member of the Supervisor of Airlift Unit working on the Tan Son Nhut flight line at Tiger Ops, described his perception of the processing problems:

One point I think was very important and should be a big "lesson learned" for any such future operation: the problem of processing people. It seems none of the evacuation plans considered the amount of red tape that would be encountered and generated by the various government department and nonofficial agencies. Bribes, threats, and covert operations were necessary to evacuate even a few dozen people per day. Even when proper clearance was finally obtained, our plans did not provide for the personnel necessary in the early part of the operation for processing people aboard USAF aircraft. Baggage inspections, aircraft security, and personal searches required a tremendous workload and a great amount of time.

During the initial days of the thinning out, all available aircraft were used. These included commercial carriers as well as Military Airlift Command aircraft, and contract planes designated for the "Babylift." In the latter case, Defense Attache Office employees were designated as orphan escorts, thus establishing a cover for their departure while furnishing much-needed support for the "Babylift."

It is important to remember that many other actions were concurrently taking place with the initial thinning out process. Army Chief of Staff General F. C. Weyand, at the direction of President Ford, was on a special mission to Vietnam at this time. General Weyand, as well as other American military personnel, felt that there was still a chance for survival of a truncated Republic of Vietnam (the remainder of Military Regions 3 and 4) if immediate action were taken to allocate a supplemental assistance fund. In the meantime, the three Defense Attache Office service divisions (Army, Air Force and Navy) continued to work with their Republic of Vietnam counterparts. All the remaining materiel (replacement war materials) available in continental US were called forward by priority air transportation. With the resulting stepped-up airlift of Military Airlift Command planes into the Republic of Vietnam, empty transports became a readily available means to carry out evacuees.

On 1 April, the Evacuation Control Center began operations, just in time to face ever-increasing problems. However, no one could have then predicted that South Vietnam's collapse would occur so precipitously.

The manning of the Evacuation Control Center was a true "purple suit" mix of four USAF, three Navy, two Army, and three Marine officers assigned to various duties. Colonel Edward Hughes, USAF, was one of the two team chiefs and Lieutenant Colonels Laehr and Hilgenberg plus Major Peter Boyette, USAF, were assigned to work at the Air Operations desk (figure 5). Only Colonel Hilgenberg had previous command center experience, but as events developed, he never actually worked in the Evacuation Control Center.

The five primary functions of the Center indicate the nature of the evacuation effort:

- Coordinate the evacuation activities of all US agencies;

- Match evacuation requirements and assets;

- Provide a communications link among all US commands associated with FREQUENT WIND;

- Provide timely information as required to assist in decision making; and,

- Coordinate a priority system, concerning "Mob Control" with applicable agencies. This fifth function was born of necessity as the evacuation effort progressed.

The Center will be described in more detail later in the chapter. On 1 April, the Evacuation Control Center opened on a 12-hour day shift, but went to a 24-hour schedule the next day. The officers and civilians of the Defense Attache's Office were supplemented by four ground radio operators from the 1961st Communications Group, USAF, Clark AB, Philippines.

Initial Evacuation Control Center operations centered around the refugee sealift from Military Regions 1 and 2. Admiral Gayler sent Admiral Hugh Benton to Saigon to control the Military Sealift Command vessels engaged in refugee operations. In General Smith's words, Admiral Benton "was up to his eyeballs in people." Under the latter's directions, the Evacuation Control Center coordinated the efforts of all ships (US and foreign) to solve transportation, food, water, and security problems.

The evacuation of the refugees from Military Regions 1 and 2 proved to be a nightmare for both the Vietnamese government and the Americans trying to assist. An average of eight Military Sealift Command contract ships, along with several South Korean, Nationalist Chinese, British, and Philippine vessels participated. The Vietnamese Navy committed every available vessel to evacuate troops, refugees, and goods—though little materiel was recovered.

The initial refugee movement was to Cam Ranh Bay and Nha Trang, but when the rapid North Vietnamese Army advance threat-

ened these ports, the refugees headed south again. Some landed at Vung Tau (mostly troops), but many were taken against their will to Phu Quoc Island off the west coast of South Vietnam, to ease the projected refugee load in Saigon. Conditions aboard the ships were atrocious with virtually no food, water, or security. All vessels were grossly overcrowded. It was reported that the SS *Pioneer Contender* had 16,000 evacuees aboard during a trip from Nha Trang to Phu Quoc Island. Hundreds died from thirst or starvation and were dumped overboard. Armed South Vietnamese troops aboard the ships posed a serious threat to all. In several cases, mutinies forced small Military Sealift Command crews to return to Vung Tau. Only after rations, water, and Marine security guards were provided was the situation stabilized, and the sealift continued. By 3 April contact was lost with Nha Trang, and it was then that refugee sealift operations began to abate.

The original hope of evacuating one million refugees from Military Region I was not realized. The pressure of the North Vietnamese Army was too great. General Smith noted:

In retrospect, had the one million refugees been successfully evacuated south, the RVN would have had an insurmountable problem with their relocation. As it was, they experienced great difficulties in assimilating the less than 100,000 that did escape.

As the sealift began to lose impetus, airlift was increased, particularly after the arrival of the Military Airlift Command's C-141s and C-5s carrying the war materiel called forward by the Defense Attache Office. The military aircraft which normally would have departed Saigon empty offered an excellent opportunity to carry out personnel. In late March, Military Airlift Command aircraft were arriving at a rate of two or three each day and were handled by Major Delligatti's flight line crew. His Supervisor of Airlift contingent was also still managing the rielift to Cambodia. During the first few days in April, as the number of cargo aircraft increased, the Supervisor of Airlift became involved in the "Babylift" of Vietnamese orphans which was getting increased emphasis from both the Departments of State and Defense. As the "Babylift" was getting underway, a triangular coordination system began operating at Tan Son Nhut to manage this and other parts of the evacuation. At the apexes were the Evacuation Control Center, the Supervisor of Airlift unit, and the newly formed Evacuation Processing Center. Until the end, this triangle was to handle the vast majority of the airlift movements in and out of Saigon.

As this system began to work, another important complementary effort got underway. The Defense Attache Office's Special Planning Group was created by the Defense Attache and was headed by Lieutenant Colonel Richard Bean, USA. Under open charter from



Figure 7. USAF Aircrewman Changing a Diaper on a Vietnamese Orphan During "Operation Babylift" April 1975.

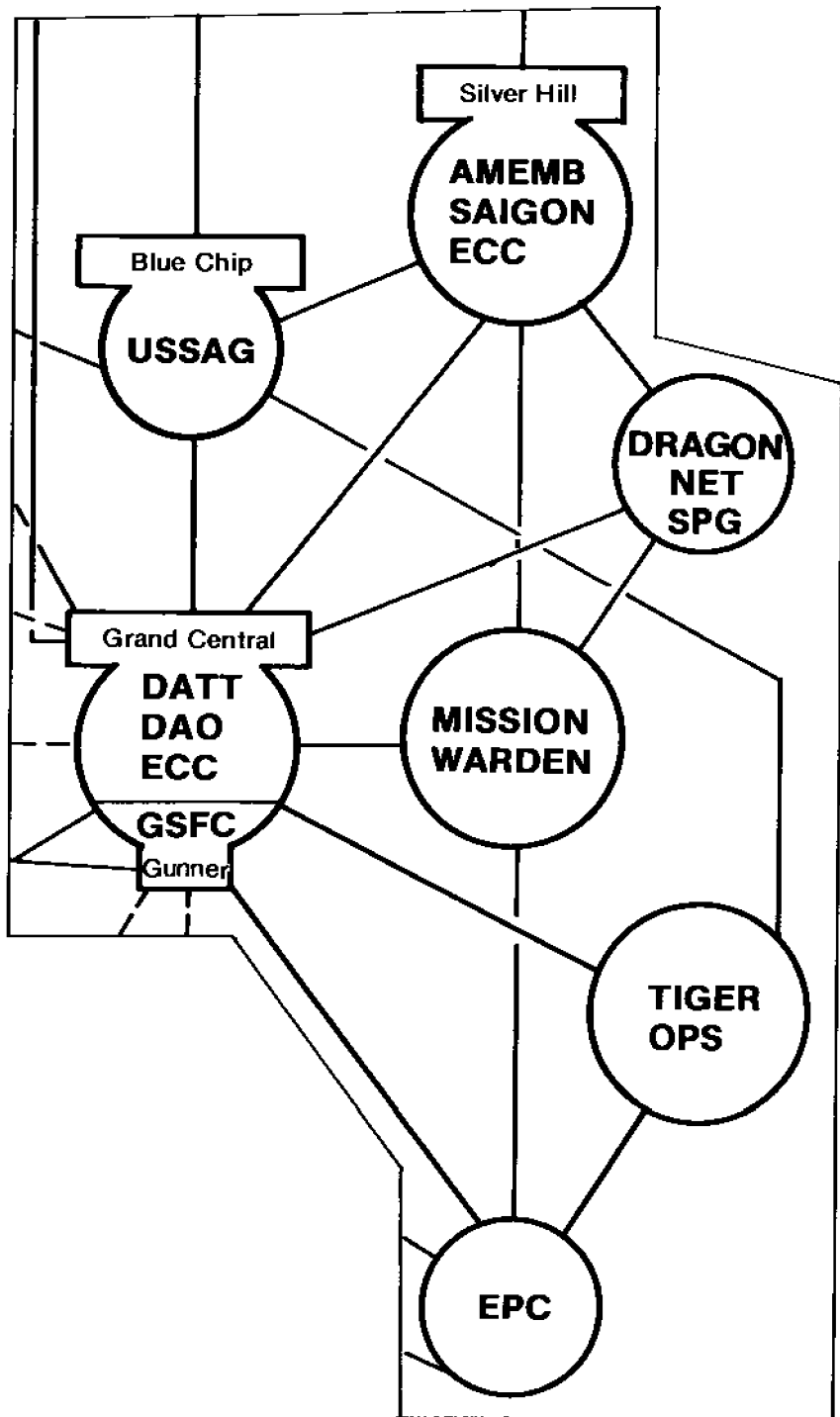


Figure 8. Evacuation Communications.

the Defense Attache, the Special Planning Group undertook four projects: preparation of the Defense Attache Office complex, arranging for the security of the complex (Compound and Annex), removal of personnel by air from metropolitan Saigon, and the removal of personnel from Metropolitan Saigon by surface means.

On 1 April the Planning Group began the initial planning on ways to utilize Defense Attache Office facilities and the adjacent Annex as a refugee-evacuee holding area prior to actual movement. This effort was nicknamed "Project Alamo." The initial requirement was to find a building or buildings large enough to care for 1,500 persons for a period of five days. By 4 April, the major functional areas and basic requirements had been established. Key Defense Attache Office civilian managers were tasked to develop arrangements for the following: billeting, facilities engineering, transportation, traffic control, warehousing-logistics, medical, and sanitation.

The 3 April Special Planning Group meeting established a task force to identify locations and densities of the US and "third country" evacuee population within metropolitan Saigon. Representatives from USAID, USIS, DAP, State, and the various civilian contractors comprised the task force. The population density plot information was used as a planning foundation for the Alamo project and, subsequently, the extensive planning for the air and surface evacuation plans for metropolitan Saigon.

In connection with Project Alamo, the Special Planning Group designed a security program to provide a makeshift Defense Attache Office self-defense force. Prior to 1 April the complex was guarded by 39 retired Vietnamese soldiers under the supervision of four Americans. After the experiences of Da Nang and Nha Trang, the odds of the Vietnamese guards remaining on duty during times of crisis were very low at best.

The Planning Group designated two ten-man reaction squads who were billeted in the Defense Attache Office area. The designated volunteers (military officers and civilians) assigned to the Defense Attache Office were to be supplemented by an eight-man contingent consisting of the Marine security guards from the US consulates at Da Nang and Nha Trang. The reaction forces were placed on 24-hour call. Fifteen more men from the US Army Communications unit assigned to the satellite communications system were designated as a backup force.

Meanwhile, early collapse of the northern military regions prompted Defense Attache Office officials to assign a higher priority to the thinning-out process. In the area of personnel processing, the Defense Attache Office's Personnel Division had the initial primary responsibility. In late March and the first days of April, its principal efforts involved the processing and paying off of mission employees (US and VN) and Third Country Nationals arriving in large numbers

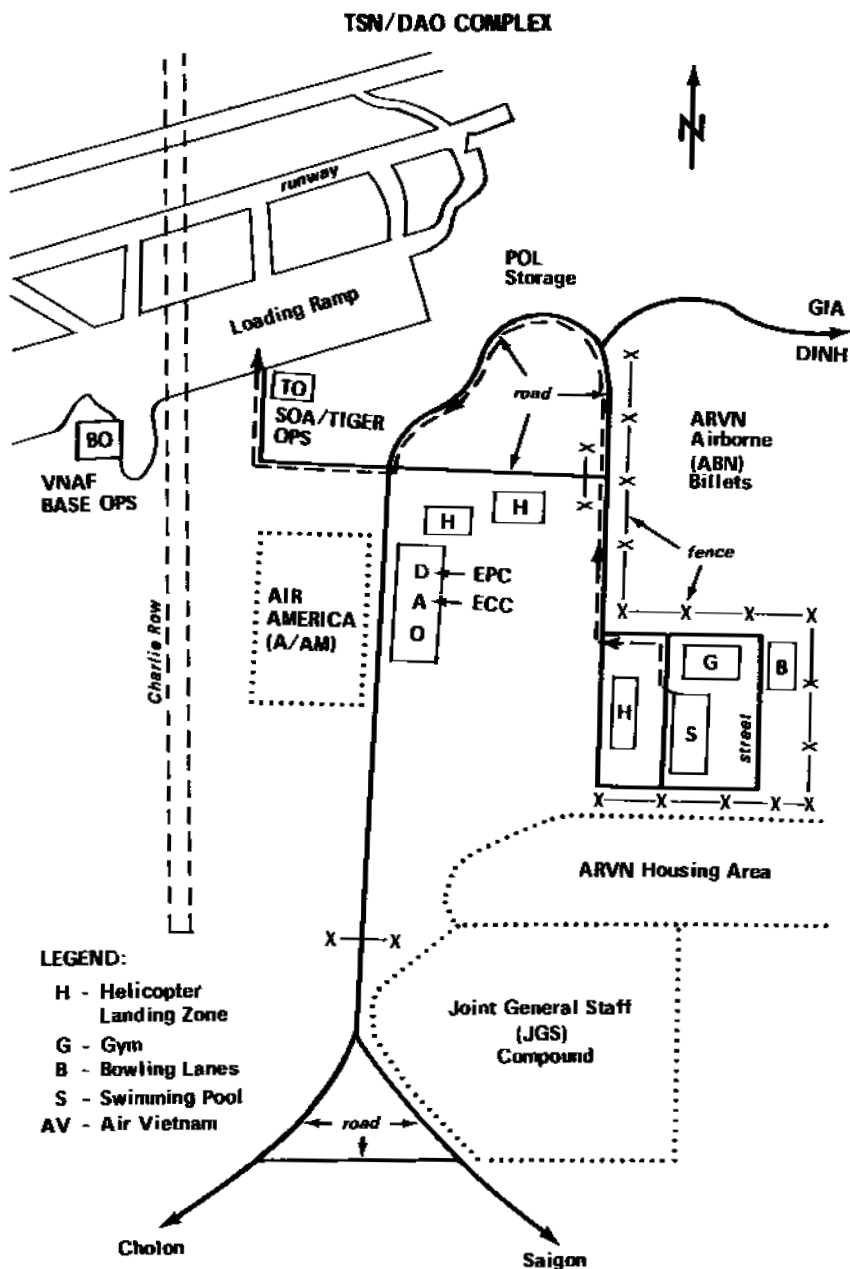


Figure 9. Map of Tan Son Nhut AB, Spring 1975.

in Saigon from the northern provinces. Simultaneously, they were working on reducing the surplus employees. The job was complicated by the Civil Service rules mentioned earlier and the fact that large numbers of official personnel folders had to be gathered, reproduced, packed, and shipped to Travis AFB for reconstruction of the individual files. Maintaining the records in Vietnam in the first place, rather than in the Philippines or Hawaii, was another questionable procedure. On 3 April, the evacuee processing-booking operations were moved from the Defense Attache Office headquarters to the adjacent theater, where there was more room. On 4 April, initial supervision of the Evacuation Processing Center was delegated to Colonel J. F. Franham, USAF, Chief, Joint Casualty Resolution Center, who prepared to implement the evacuation plans.

Brigadier General Richard M. Baughn, Deputy Attache, decided to evacuate 100 employees per day, but this was quickly increased to 200 per day. On Friday, 4 April, an unusual opportunity to evacuate 40-50 employees was identified when word was received that a C-5A carrying weapons for the South Vietnamese forces was reported inbound. The entire aircraft would be available for the evacuation of passengers and orphans. In a frenzy of activity and coordination, 37 secretaries and analysts of the Defense Attache Office, all women, were selected to serve as escorts for about 250 orphans to be moved under Operation "Babylift." In midafternoon, the aircraft delivered its cargo of 17 105mm howitzers, and the entire unloading operation was filmed by Vietnamese and American TV crews. The Vietnamese Air Force stated that the purpose of the filming was to demonstrate to the Vietnamese people that the US was still supporting the Thieu government. At the same time, however, the humanitarian "Babylift" was fully covered as orphans and sponsors were hurriedly loaded aboard the aircraft. The aircraft departed Tan Son Nhut without incident. At 23,000 feet during climbout and 10 miles off the Vietnamese coast near Vung Tau, the C-5 experienced a massive structural failure in the rear cargo door area.

In a considerable feat of airmanship, Captain Dennis Traynor and his crew nursed the aircraft back over Saigon and attempted to make an emergency landing at Tan Son Nhut. The explosive decompression had blown out a huge section of the cargo ramp and door and cut all control cables to the rudder and elevator. Using only ailerons (and engine power for pitch control) Captain Traynor was forced to crash land in rice paddies about five miles short of the Tan Son Nhut runway. The aircraft touched down initially on the east side of the Saigon River, bounced and flew about one-half mile across the river where it touched down again and broke up into four major sections. (Figure 9) From the crew compartment, upper passenger compartment, and the remnants of the fuselage section, 175 survivors of the crash were able to climb out. The crew members, after freeing

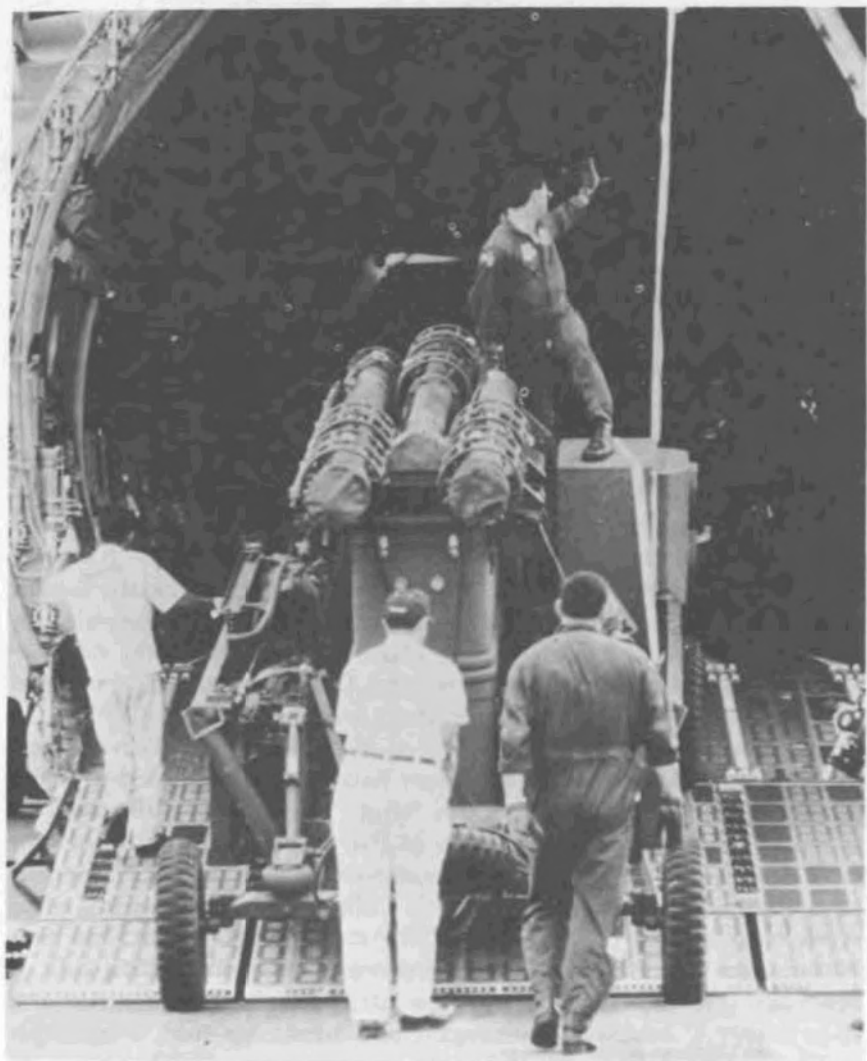


Figure 10. Unloading Equipment for the RVNAF From the USAF C-5 That Later Crashed Just After its Departure From Tan Son Nhut With a Load of Orphans, April 1975.

themselves, assisted in pulling other survivors from the aircraft wreckage. Within minutes of the crash, Air America and Vietnamese Air Force helicopters from Tan Son Nhut and Bien Hoa were on the scene rescuing survivors. Later, they recovered the bodies of those killed in the crash.

Late in the evening of 4 April, Lieutenant Colonels Laehr and Hilgenberg and Mr. Jess Markham, Defense Attache Office civilian, found quarters, food, and clothing for the C-5A crew. They then assisted in coordinating the arrival of C-130s from U-Tapao bringing in additional members of the Joint Casualty Resolution Team who were given responsibility for handling the remains of those who died in the crash.

Colonel J. P. Farnham, Chief of Joint Casualty Resolution Center, who had been appointed to direct operation of the Evacuation Processing Center on 3 April, was reassigned to supervise the search for victims of the crash. He and his men never became totally involved in the evacuation effort again, and the Evacuation Processing Center was suddenly without a military supervisor.

The first four days in April ended on a tragic note. The Vietnam Mission mourned the loss of the orphans and escorts while continuing to prepare for the inevitable full-scale evacuation. To describe the C-5A crash as a monstrous stroke of bad luck, in an already serious and deteriorating emergency situation, would probably be one of the understatements of a lifetime.

Chapter IV. The Quickening Pace: Fixed Wing Evacuation Buildup, 5-19 April 1975

The atmosphere in the Defense Attache Office and Saigon, on the morning of 5 April, was one of sorrow and despair. Fellow workers of the dead employees of the Defense Attache Office and the various orphan agencies were attempting to regroup and make necessary arrangements. The American Embassy and the Defense Attache Office were besieged by calls from the Departments of State and Defense, Headquarters USAF, CINCPAC, and the Military Airlift Command, all wanting more details on the crash. Sabotage of the aircraft was strongly suspected. An accurate manifest of Americans and Third Country Nationals on the aircraft was available, but a precise listing of orphans surviving or killed was difficult to obtain due to inadequate records on the children. The most immediate effects in Saigon were that the crash prevented use of more C-5As and cast a pall on the people making the final preparations for the surge to come.

That morning, after discussing the accident with Captain Traynor and crew (within limits set by the Military Airlift Command and 22nd Air Force) and interviewing several eyewitnesses of the crash, Hilgenberg reported his findings to Brigadier General Baughn, Major General Smith and General Weyand who was concluding his fact-finding tour in Vietnam for President Ford. Following the briefing, Hilgenberg was appointed by General Baughn as Defense Attache Office project officer for all matters involving the investigation of the crash. Consequently, a large portion of Hilgenberg's service was denied to the evacuation effort until about the 18th of April. He had to devote most of his time to the Military Airlift Command accident investigating team that arrived at Tan Son Nhut soon after the crash.

The task was made all the more difficult because the US was still adhering to the Ceasefire Agreement's maximum of 50 military men allowed in South Vietnam (at a time when whole divisions of the

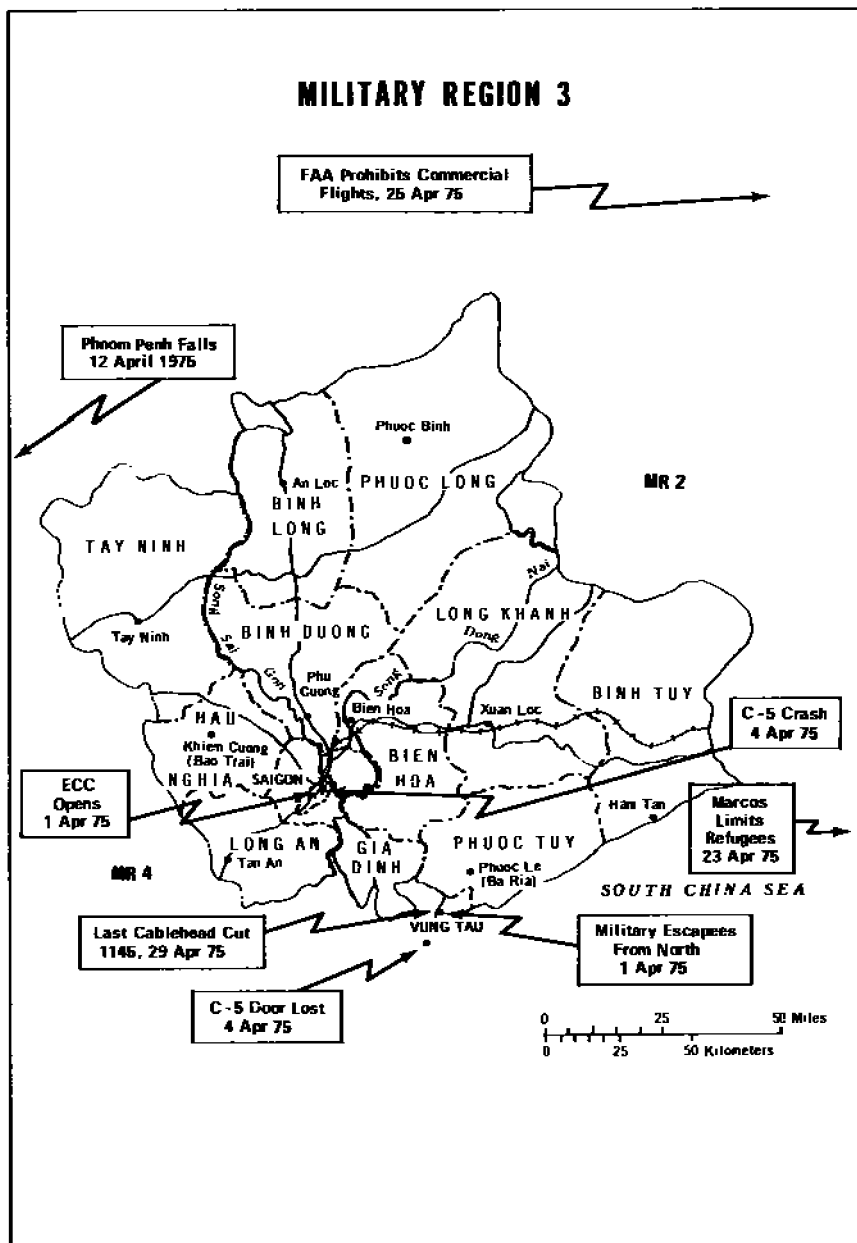


Figure 11. THE QUICKENING PACE, 5-19 April 1975.

North Vietnamese were bearing down on Saigon). To stay within these limitations the Military Airlift Team had to return to Clark AB each night. Also complicating the work was the fact that surface access to the crash site was out of the question, and all movements had to be made by Air America helicopters. Since the available security forces were inadequate even before the accident, there was no possibility of protecting the crash site from pilferage. The province chief provided some "guards," but there is good evidence that they participated in rather than prevented the stealing of the parts of the airplane and its cargo. It was said that one Defense Attache Office secretary who was killed had \$10,000 worth of jewelry on her person when she left, and none of it was ever found in the wreckage. One of the most vital things to disappear was the flight recorder. Using a time-honored Oriental method of recovery, it was returned to the accident team through a "Buy Back" program. The Navy got into the act in an impressive way. The rear door of the C-5 had blown off the aircraft after passing the coast on the way to the Philippines. At the time, the exact position of the incident was not precisely known, but the Navy located the door and some other parts on the ocean floor. They also recovered the remains of the one crewman who was blown from the aircraft by the explosive decompression.

As noted earlier, the C-5A crash had immediate implications for the evacuation effort. Detailed booking and manifesting of passengers on all but the orphan flights had been normal procedure for the few people who previously departed. With sabotage a distinct possibility in the C-5 incident, a contingent of US Security Police personnel from Clark was stationed in Saigon to prevent any hijack attempts and to check all baggage placed aboard military aircraft. In addition, armed security guards accompanied each flight. The C-5A had been combat loaded (no seats, passengers sitting on the floor). Once the evacuation resumed, each evacuee required a seat and seat belt, a fact which reduced passenger loads considerably during the first few weeks in April.

The evacuation fleet for the next two weeks was mixed. The numbers of USAF aircraft (C-141s and C-130s) were on the increase (no more C-5s). American commercial and contract flights were also used, though decreasing in frequency toward the end of the period. Foreign carriers were full on each departure as embassy and other personnel from various countries represented in Saigon jammed the commercial terminal at Tan Son Nhut from dawn to dark. Even foreign military aircraft from Australia, Poland, Iran, Indonesia, etc., flew in to pick up personnel from their respective nations. One got the clear impression when the Polish and Hungarian members of the International Commission for Control and Supervision departed en masse, that the end was rapidly drawing near. Such observations

were depressing at best for those who were still trying to run an uncertain evacuation.

While these activities were taking place on the flight line, continuing preparations were in progress in other areas of the Defense Attache Office and the city. The Special Planning Group completed the population density plot information on 7 April. The plot accounted for the location of 7,000 persons by number and location. The density plot was continually updated throughout the month of April providing the *only* mission-wide accurate data on the whereabouts of top priority evacuees. Additionally, the density plot caused the Planning Group to revise the requirements of the Defense Attache Office complex to 5,000 persons instead of the original 1,500. The Military Airlift Command was given the new figure to use in its planning. The projected increase in the number of persons to be evacuated daily caused the Planning Group to change its plans for the operation of the Defense Attache Office complex to provide for nearly autonomous operation. With the new requirement to handle 5,000 people for one week, six C-141 cargo loads of supplies and equipment were flown into Tan Son Nhut from various bases throughout the Pacific. Improvised sanitary facilities (slit trenches, garbage dumps, etc.) were dug. Large amounts of food were moved from the Mission Commissary near Newport docks to the Defense Attache Office compound. This included a reefer full of frozen meats, a surprise to all and a testimony to the efficient young officers working on the Special Planning Group. By 16 April, Project Alamo (the security plan for the Defense Attache complex) was complete. Water, POL, and meals (C-rations)* were stockpiled. All power-generating facilities had been duplicated, buildings had been modified, sanitary facilities were completed and were in place. Concertina and barbed wire were stockpiled in key locations—the Defense Attache Office complex was ready.

Although preparations called for in Project Alamo were completed, the Defense Attache Office security program ran into trouble. The security plan seemed reasonable, fluid, flexible, and sound when it was prepared, but it did not work! Things simply happened too fast. As the Defense Attache Office reduced nonessential personnel, new problems cropped up causing additional duties to be assigned to the remaining security force individuals. Consequently, with the continuing deterioration of security in the Saigon-Tan Son Nhut area, it became impossible to maintain any continuity in the force.

On 13 April a 13-man US Embassy Marine Security Guard detachment was provided the Defense Attache Office to replace the eight-man Da Nang-Nha Trang Marines. The new Marines proved

*C-Rations are nonperishable emergency meals.

to be an excellent group, but in the face of increasing pressure from Vietnamese of all descriptions who were seeking evacuation, they were still too few to provide even minimum security for the entire complex.

While the Special Planning Group was preparing for the security of the complex, it was also preparing for air and surface transfer of personnel from metropolitan Saigon to the Defense Attache Office area.

The possibility of simply not being able to move through the streets of Saigon and the risks involved made it imperative to design a scheme for air movement of evacuees to supplement the surface movement plan. The Planning Group felt that the best time to use an air evacuation program would be at first light. The helicopter force could "mop-up" any stragglers from the same Helicopter Landing Zones following and *after curfew* surface evacuation.

In the original Embassy Emergency and Evacuation Plan, Helicopter Landing Zones were considered inadequate in the final plan of the Special Planning Group. There was no way to get the evacuees to the Helicopter Landing Zones, there was no security at the original locations, and there was no way to prevent Vietnamese crowds from attempting to board the extraction helicopters as had happened in Da Nang and Nha Trang.

Rooftops of US leased buildings (those over four stories high) were selected as the best and safest helicopter landing sites. On 6 April, 37 buildings located throughout metropolitan Saigon were surveyed by members of the Special Planning Group. The survey team used the following criteria to select the buildings:

1. Obstacle-free roof space;
2. Roof strength to support helicopters;
3. Easy rooftop access for women, children, etc;
4. Lower building area security potential;
5. Aircraft ingress-egress routes; and
6. Landing site locations (throughout city) in relation to population plot.

Thirteen buildings which met the criteria were selected. No buildings had the rotor clearance or roof strength to support CH-53s or CH-46s. All rooftops selected were capable of safely handling UH-1s. Since Air America had UH-1s and their pilots would be using small landing sites, the Special Planning Group requested and received the services of an Air America pilot to help with a final detailed survey of the 13 selected rooftops. The detailed survey resulted in some minor modification to the rooftops.

Air America took helicopters out of storage to give maximum support to the evacuation. They had 28 aircraft and were capable of putting 24 in the air at any given time. A total of 31 pilots agreed to stay in Saigon and support the evacuation. This meant that the Air America UH-1s would be flown with only one pilot. This was risky,

but Air America was accustomed to such risks and expressed no reservation about that aspect of the Saigon air evacuation. Air America pilot, Capt Nik Fillippi, and 1st Lt Bob Twigger, Marine pilot from Okinawa, planned a detailed air traffic control system and flow plan to insure and permit a coordinated evacuation effort between Air America and the USMC air operations.

The Planning Group also surveyed the Defense Attache Office complex for possible Helicopter Landing Zones. Six zones were selected for use within the main Defense Attache Office compound and annex, making the complex capable of landing 12 Ch-53s simultaneously. Photos were flown out to the Marine Amphibious Brigade, now holding in the South China Sea. Pacific Architects and Engineers Incorporated was to level and stabilize Landing Zones when directed by the Defense Attache.

Ingress-egress routes were planned and flown from Saigon to the ships holding off the coast of Vung Tau. Altitudes and call signs were confirmed and communications checked.

A Marshalling Area Control Officer was assigned to each Landing Zone, and Control Officer kits were prepared and distributed. The kits contained orange vests, hand held loudspeakers, flashlights, gas masks, name tags, smoke grenades, and crowd control items. A special device was the Control Officers' signal marker, a paddle ball racket painted day-glo green on one side and international orange on the other, to be used by the Marshalling Area Controllers to signal their assistants when to send a load of passengers to the helicopters.

On 9 April, workers from Pacific Architects and Engineers began the modification to the Saigon rooftop sites. This modification project was completed on 13 April. An "H" outline was painted on each rooftop to mark the precise landing spot for the UH-1s. The H was the exact dimension of the skids of the helicopter.

Landing site controllers were also provided kits. These kits were more elaborate than Marshalling Area kits since site controllers needed communication equipment and signaling devices. Radios were needed to communicate with the helicopters, with the Defense Attache Office base station, and Evacuation Control Center, and with the lower floors and assembly areas within each Helicopter Landing Site building. The kits contained two TA-312/PT field telephones with spare batteries, strobe lights, flashlights, signal mirrors, and ropes. Windssocks were available on 10-foot poles to help the pilots with their approaches to the rooftop sites.

To plan for the assembling of the requisite people at the air evacuation zones, the Planning Group task force used the imaginative efforts of its members, the involvement of the organization, the cooperation of the personnel involved, and the adoption of some unconventional ideas. To effectively compile the population density plot, the Planning Group picked representatives from the five key

US agencies of the Embassy. The task force examined ration card records, Combined Recreation Association (US Embassy) memberships, Cercle Sportif (recreation club) memberships, Defense Attache Office liquor ration card listings, metropolitan taxi dispatch records for the previous three months, and billeting occupant listings from the mission's component organizations. Simply stated, the surface evacuation plan for Saigon was based on and built around the population density plot.

Like all the other plans, the surface plan had its problems. By 15 April, things were happening so fast in Saigon that the Mission Warden's office had to cancel the plans and listings of the original 29 embassy assembly points. Evacuees immediately had to study the new plan identifying 13 new locations and the routes to use to get to the assembly locations. With all the confusion, rumors, questions, the always-advancing North Vietnamese Army and the possibility of implementing the helicopter evacuation plan, people suddenly began to realize that the final crisis was near. Unfortunately, the 13 new Rooftop Landing Sites were not adequately dispersed throughout the outlying areas of the city. To compensate for this difficulty, the surface routes and pickup points were planned to go past as many of the original 29 assembly points as possible. People were briefed to be prepared to move early and quickly to pickup points or landing sites once the alarm was sounded. The word was, "If in doubt, move to a safer location." The Mission Warden office assigned a full-time representative to the Planning Group to help assure that old and new planning was coordinated as closely as possible.

Ground transportation was another last-minute problem considered by the Special Planning Group. There were 46 buses available to the DAO, and, counting private vehicles, about 2,500 sedans. Because of the resulting congestion, the simultaneous use of all vehicles would have hampered the operation. Consequently, the plan was changed so that all evacuees would be transported by bus—and all were encouraged to use the buses, if at all possible.

By 14 April the surface evacuation plan was completed and dovetailed with the air evacuation plan. The surface movement scheme included 28 billet assembly points located along 10 surface routes. Every night 42 buses were prepositioned at designated parking locations. The best time to execute the surface plan was thought to be during curfew hours. The April curfew was normally from 2100 to 0600, but the South Vietnamese frequently changed the curfew hours depending on the pressure of the North Vietnamese, or activities within Saigon. Command and control of the surface plan and vehicles would be maintained through two FM radio nets. One net would work the buses and the other would handle the convoy escort vehicles. To help tie the two together during the operation, the Defense Attache Office would provide an officer to act as traffic coordinator in a command and control vehicle. That

vehicle would have both FM nets plus the helicopter circuit. To handle the widespread evacuation routes it was necessary to install two long-range antennae on top of the 100-foot water tower adjacent to the Defense Attache Office motor pool.

Beginning on 17 April, the escort and bus drivers made practice route reconnoitering trips every day and night. This kept everyone aware of roadblocks, checkpoints, and most importantly, the attitude of the people and situation in the streets. Personal protective equipment for drivers was distributed. Articles such as gas masks, flak jackets, smoke grenades, and first aid kits were made available, and city surface maps were placed in each vehicle. But with all these planning efforts, there still remained a major problem for the *Planning Group and the surface scheme*.

As with the security guards, the retention of route-trained persons became critical. The *Planning Group* learned early in the operation that it took each convoy escort at least five days to become effective: know his routes (both night and day) and be comfortable with the task which he faced. More than anything else, it took time to get psychologically prepared and accustomed to the harassment in the streets of Saigon. The manpower requirements were many and varied, and the battle over priorities was intense.

While the *Special Planning Group* was preparing the local area for the eventual evacuation, the *Evacuation Control Center* was becoming more deeply involved in coordination with the Embassy and out-of-country agencies. The C-5A crash forced heavy use of existing *communications* which proved to be as good as planners expected. By 7 April, several new agencies in the Saigon area were added to the original triad of officers handling the evacuation at the Defense Attache Office (figure 8). The Embassy (code named SILVER HILL), the Dragon Net (the *Special Planning Group* operating frequency) and the Mission Warden office all fed into the *Evacuation Control Center* as communications were checked and double checked from all the various landing sites and assembly areas.

As noted earlier, the refugee sealift began to diminish in the first week in April as the northern Military Regions were lost. This did not mean the end of sealift operations, only that in-country refugee sealift evolved into planning for evacuation by sealift from Vietnam itself.

Admiral Obje Oberg, the representative of the Commander-in-Chief of the Pacific Fleet, arrived about the same time as Admiral Benton. He was responsible for *coordination* between the Defense Attache Office and the Commander, Task Force (CTF-76), which began operation off the coasts of South Vietnam and Cambodia early in April. The Task Force consisted of some 50 vessels from the US Seventh Fleet and the Military Sealift Command. Included in the Task Force were three Marine Amphibious Ready Groups, three attack aircraft carriers, and the accompanying support ships.

In his speech to the nation on 11 April, President Ford promised to evacuate Vietnamese citizens of various categories. President Ford's speech reinforced and confirmed Ambassador Martin's public promise to evacuate all US mission employees and their families, since some in Saigon believed that leaving them behind would be abandoning them to the conquering North Vietnamese. There were approximately 17,000 employees on the Mission rolls which, using an average of seven members per family, equated to 119,000 Vietnamese to be evacuated. When other categories of Vietnamese to whom commitments were made were included, the total quickly ballooned to approximately 200,000. It should be remembered that the original options of the CINCPAC Concept Plan 5060 (nicknamed TALON VISE)—did not initially define specific numbers of Vietnamese evacuees.

The situations which developed during the evacuation of Da Nang and other cities down the coast of Vietnam caused second thoughts concerning certain assumptions in the Concept Plan options. One prime assumption was that the South Vietnamese Army forces would provide adequate crowd control and area security in the event of an evacuation. It became obvious that the South Vietnamese armed forces could not be counted on to provide any kind of control or security, but in fact, could become adversaries under panic conditions. On 13 April the Joint Chiefs of Staff requested the Commander-in-Chief of the Pacific Forces to develop plans for the evacuation of 1,500, 3,000, and 6,000 US personnel and to develop an additional plan for 200,000 evacuees. Ambassador Martin added his own requirement for Defense Attache Office planners—the potential for the evacuation of one million refugees.

Captain Neil Carmody, the Naval Attache, developed sealift plans calling for evacuation using the Newport harbor complex and Military Sealift Command for the short trip (8 hours) down the Saigon river. With three merchant ships (capacity—7,000 each) and two LSTs (capacity—4,000 each) then anchored in Newport. Thus, the potential to evacuate about 30,000 people was close at hand. But this was a long way from 200,000, much less the staggering figure of one million. However, the security for a Newport extraction was dependent on South Vietnamese Army troops who worked and lived in the harbor area. Additionally, river security (firing from river banks, mining, etc.) could present problems to such a flotilla. A more significant factor than security was the probability that an evacuation through the port facilities could very easily precipitate a collapse of the government. The use of shipping to move people could not easily be disguised, and it was almost certain to cause panic among the population of the city.

Another naval option that was planned was an evacuation of Vietnamese citizens from the city of Vung Tau. It was envisioned

that evacuees would travel the 70 highway miles overland to the seaport town. From there, US Navy ships would provide transportation. The only hitch was that the route to the seaport town of Vung Tau (QL-15) and the town itself had to remain open and reasonably secure to even consider this plan. Captain Carmody felt that two requirements had to be fulfilled if the Vung Tau option was to be utilized. The first was security of the Vung Tau peninsula. Remnants of the Vietnamese Marine Division from Military Region I under the leadership of Major General Lan were in Vung Tau. Major General Lan felt his troops could control the bridges and accesses to the peninsula but would be hard pressed to simultaneously control the refugees gathering in the area. The population in Vung Tau, which included many refugees from Da Nang and Nha Trang, had swelled from 130,000 upwards to nearly 200,000. Major General Lan felt that US Marines would be required to hold off the North Vietnamese troops while his Vietnamese Marines controlled the crowds and the loading and embarkation points. The second requirement was a beach survey by an Underwater Demolition Team to make certain that an over-the-beach loading could safely be accomplished.

In conjunction with the sealift planning, other contingency planning options were being updated; all involved the commitment of USAF and USMC aircraft. As noted earlier, evacuation planners had started working on options which ranged from the movement of anywhere from 1,500 to 6,000 evacuees. Now the upper limit of 200,000 was added, with an ultimate figure of 1,000,000 also under study.

On 17 April, a T-39 landed at Tan Son Nhut to pick up Brigadier General Leroy Swenson, USAF, the new Deputy Attache, a civilian representative from the Military Sealift Command staff, and Lt Col Tobin to transport them to USSAG-7th AF Headquarters at Nakhon Phanom Air Base, Thailand. Brigadier General Swenson had replaced Brigadier General Baughn. Tom Tobin didn't know it then, but he was departing Saigon for the last time. Brigadier General Swenson was to attend North Vietnamese threat assessment briefings with the 7th AF senior staff. Colonel Tobin and the Military Sealift Command representative were to meet with planning representatives from the Commander-in-Chief Pacific; Commander US Special Advisory Group, 7th Air Force; Commander-in-Chief Pacific Fleet; Commander Pacific Air Force; and the Commander of the Third Marine Division. Augmented by several members of the 7th AF staff, this group updated the evacuation plans by preparing options for fifteen hundred, three thousand, and six thousand persons. A scheme to bring 200,000 escapees out of Vung Tau was also drafted, but it was not as well developed as the other designs. Since the hour was short, these documents were coordinated in record time.

At about this time, EAGLE PULL, the evacuation of Phnom Penh was carried out, and though the scope of the work was not as great as that envisioned for TALON VISE-FREQUENT WIND, the operation was nevertheless a splendid dress rehearsal for what was to come. A great many of the units involved in EAGLE PULL were also involved in the evacuation of Saigon.

The Rules of Engagement for US support forces during the evacuation were to be authorized by the Commander-in-Chief, Pacific, and be directed by the Commander US Support Activities Group, 7th Air Force. Sufficient Forces would be used to ensure protection and the successful evacuation of noncombatants. Air support operations would include US Navy and Air Force tactical aircraft (primarily A-7s, F-4s, and AC-130s), Forward Air Controllers, Electronic Countermeasure support, Strategic Air Command (SAC) air-to-air refuelers, radio relay KC-135s, PACAF Airborne Command and Control Center aircraft (ABCCC/C-130), and Search and Rescue units as required. Tactical air would provide continuous cover over the operation to lend immediate support if needed. Additional aircraft and personnel would be on alert in Thailand and on board attack aircraft carriers. Additionally, naval gunfire support could be delivered to protect Vung Tau or to provide security for shipping in the Saigon River.

While the US forces completed Operation EAGLE PULL in Cambodia and ships maneuvered in the Gulf of Siam and the South China Sea, activities in Saigon were not progressing as rapidly as desired. During the period 5-19 April, the evacuation was moving at an agonizingly slow pace, despite the daily arrival of USAF C-141s and C-130s. Nevertheless, as it later turned out, a small group of USAF officers and airmen forming the US Support Activities Group, 7th AF Supervisor of Airlift group proved to be one of the really vital cogs in the evacuation machinery. On 27 February, the Supervisor of Airlift had been formed in Flying Tiger Airline Operations on the flight line of Tan Son Nhut. They were to supervise the airlift of rice and kerosene to Cambodia by four civilian contract carriers. They performed this function until Phnom Penh fell on 12 April. However, by virtue of their location, experience, communications capability, and knowledge of Tan Son Nhut and the Vietnamese who ran the airfield, they soon picked up the additional job of managing the growing US resupply effort as the US attempted to replace supplies and equipment lost by the South Vietnamese Air Force in Military Regions 1 and 2. Once the evacuation effort began on 1 April, the flight line part of the evacuation also became a portion of their domain.

As the resupply effort faded for the Supervisor of Airlift group and Major Delligatti's unit became more involved in the evacuation, the violation of the principle of unity of command caused some

problems. Major Delligatti was instructed by 7th AF to provide intelligence for inbound fixed-wing aircraft, ramp security for aircraft on the ground at Tan Son Nhut, coordination with US Support Activities Group-7th Air Force on all C-141 and C-130 aircraft movements through the terminal, and be the single point of contact at Tan Son Nhut for all affairs having to do with C-141 — C-130 traffic through Saigon. Since the last two tasks had also been assigned to the Evacuation Control Center, some confusion ensued. The problem was overcome, as often happened in the Vietnam War, by means of spontaneous cooperation among the people at the working level. As the operation progressed, Colonel McCurdy, who was Delligatti's boss, assigned the Supervisor of Airlift the further tasks of being the single point of contact for certain special groups of evacuees, bribing immigration officials to speed the operation (often by means of evacuating the official's family), and serving as the exclusive control of World Airway's orphan evacuation flights.

The 7th AF Supervisor of Airlift was initially assigned a complement of 11 security guards, one customs official, and eight maintenance specialists for the processing of evacuees and the flight line operation of the C-141s. In addition, two USAF officers, Captain Frank Shapira and Captain Bill O'Brien from the Aerial Port of Clark AB, were assigned to supervise the aircraft unloading of supplies and loading of passengers.

On 8 April, after a South Vietnamese Air Force F-5 bombed the Presidential Palace, the rielift civil carriers threatened to evacuate aircraft and crews. Quick negotiations by the Supervisor of Airlift group solved this problem. On 14 April, two days after the end of the rielift, Mr. Ed Daly, President of World Airways, who almost lost a 727 on 29 March while attempting to evacuate refugees from Da Nang, said that he would evacuate his "rielift" employees in his DC-8, though still assigned under government contract. Through the efforts of Major Delligatti and Colonel McCurdy, the departure of employees was delayed though Mr. Daly did depart in the DC-8. On 16 April the Supervisor of Airlift group began coordinating with the special interest groups, such as the major network news media staffs. Following State Department approval for the evacuation of local national intelligence and operations (sensitive) personnel on 17 April, the Supervisor of Airlift group also began coordinating the "Black Flights," the special mission code name for the flights moving intelligence personnel out-of-country. With minor exceptions, nearly all departures of these two latter groups during this period took place from the Air America terminal under semicovert and covert conditions. A key individual in this effort was Mr. Mike Baltazar, Air America Operations, who arranged the use of the Air America flight line area.

During the varied activities of the Supervisor of Airlift unit on the Tan Son Nhut flight line, the Evacuation Control Center was deeply involved in a growing coordination of the myriad of activities springing up as both the North Vietnamese forces and the final evacuation came closer. Of particular importance was the continuous coordination of Military Airlift Command transport flights with 22nd AF HQ at Travis AFB Ca, and Clark AB, Philippines, and US Support Activities Group-7th AF at Nakhon Phanom, Thailand. Travis scheduled the C-141s while Clark handled the C-130s. That division caused minor problems, along with the conflicts previously noted with the Supervisor of Airlift-Evacuation Control Center (Airlift Desk) interface.

But the real problem in Saigon was that many of the USAF aircraft left Tan Son Nhut empty because of personnel processing difficulties. People fleeing Saigon during the first two weeks of April left via a combination of C-141 and C-130 aircraft and commercial carriers. Those who departed on commercial aircraft were processed through Vietnamese Customs and handled as tourists or visitors who had proper passports and visas.

While special groups such as the "Black Flights" were successfully removed through the Air America terminal area, the evacuation of nearly all other categories of Americans and their dependents was running into continuous and increasing difficulties. The primary reason was the refusal of nonessential persons such as Defense Attache Office personnel on reduction-in-force or nonessential lists, terminated contractors, retired Americans, etc., to leave until they had the paperwork needed to take their Vietnamese dependents with them. In this group were people legally married but who could not get necessary papers due to Vietnamese Government red tape, others legally married who never processed the required paperwork, some with families who never bothered to marry and had no paperwork, and finally those who were married elsewhere but who had additional family members in Saigon which they would not leave. Another category was the Americans who though not attached to Vietnamese legally had such a strong sense of loyalty that they too refused to leave. Still others from outside Vietnam were trying to get Vietnamese families out of the country. The requests from outside the country were valid but impossible to handle. Not only were there no official personnel papers, but there was also no sponsor to process the paperwork. The Vietnamese bureaucracy required each Vietnamese, regardless of age or status, to have a signed South Vietnamese passport and exit visa. The processing of official evacuees was a frustrating, slow, difficult, seemingly impossible procedure. Despite briefings, urgings, and begging people to leave Saigon before things got out of control, there just didn't seem to be any effective means of getting large numbers of people to depart.

APRIL	DAILY		TOTAL	CUMULATIVE	
	US	OTHERS		US	OTHER
6	258		258	258	258
7	246		246	504	504
8	81		81	585	585
9	141	372	513	726	1098
10	138	686	804	864	1902
11	194	647	841	1058	2743
12	84	100	184	1142	2972
13	143	52	195	1285	3122
14	94		144	1379	3266
15	86	318	434	1465	3700
16	86	61	147	1551	3847
17	74	106	180	1625	4027
18	612	374	986	2237	5015
19	300	UNK	300	2537	5313
20	147	43	190	2684	5503
21	249	334	583	2933	6086
22	350	2781	3331	3483	9417
23	488	3624	4312	3971	13759
24	190	5574	5764	4161	19493
25	501	4354	4855	4662	24348
26	381	6376	6757	5043	31105
27	219	7359	7578	5262	36683
28	128	6109	6237	5390	44920
29					
30	1373*	5395	6968	6763	51184

* Includes 855 Marines from the 9th Marine Amphibious Brigade.

Source of Figures: USAF, Office of MAC History, Draft, "A Chronology of Vietnam Evacuation (FREQUENT WIND/NEW LIFE), 1 January-17 May 1975," Scott AFB, Illinois: MAC, Dec. 1975.

Major General Smith personally met with Defense Attache Office contractors on 14 April and retired military personnel (250 families) on 16 April to strongly encourage them to leave the country as soon as possible. He went so far as to withdraw Post Exchange and Commissary privileges to hasten departures, but this had little effect. Clearly, the reasons for stalling were those stated above.

During this period, embassy personnel worked out a procedure with the Ministry of Interior to cut down the processing time for exit permission. The instrument developed was termed a "Laissez Passe." It was a passport exit visa on one sheet of paper. The American Consulate also developed a "Parole Document" which would allow entry permission to the US for various categories of Vietnamese. There was even a short-lived procedure to allow "quickie marriages" in processing lines. As it turned out, only persons in the Ministry of Interior could sign the laissez passe, and in reality, the bottleneck (lines of one to one and one-half miles long) still continued.

By 19 April, only a trickle of evacuees processed through the Evacuation Processing Center in the Defense Attache Officer Theater. The original Evacuation Processing Center in the Defense Attache Office building was too small and created security problems when Vietnamese entered the building. Military Airlift Command C-141s and C-130s continued to depart Tan Son Nhut empty, even though conditions grew graver by the day. Finally, on 19 April Admiral Noel Gayler, in his visit with Ambassador Martin, suggested that "a simple piece of paper be used whereby a sponsor could sign an affidavit that personnel he listed were in fact his dependents and that he would be responsible for them after departure from RVN." The suggestion was approved, the affidavit was drafted and reproduced, and put into use that afternoon. According to Major General Smith, "This solved all the paperwork problems and left Americans with no further excuse for remaining in country." As subsequent events showed, the paperwork jam was broken, and the evacuation which had moved only about 5,000 evacuees between 1-19 April (see figure 12) began to grow in geometric proportions on the morning of 20 April.

Although many people attempted to blame Ambassador Martin for the delays in moving people out-of-country, Major General Smith stated that this was an unfair and uninformed accusation. While the Ambassador did not want to provoke a mass evacuation which could topple the government, he did everything in his power to convince Americans to leave, but he had no power to force Americans, with legal passports, to leave South Vietnam. Although only 2,535 of the estimated 10,000 Americans in South Vietnam had departed by 19 April, the big flood was about to come.

Chapter V. The Flood Tide: The Massive Fixed-Wing Airlift 20-28 April

When Sunday, the 20th, dawned, the preliminaries were over. To the extent possible in an uncertain situation, the planning had been done. The evacuation of the North was about finished, and enough people had been evacuated by air from the capital to spot any serious shortcomings in the system. However, the real test was to come in the week just starting, for the great bulk of the fixed-wing evacuation was to take place between Sunday the 20th and Monday the 28th of April. That is the story of this chapter.

The Evacuation Processing Center was moved to the Defense Attache Office Annex for full-time operation on the morning of 20 April. The primary reason for the shift was to handle the large influx of evacuees expected as a result of the new sponsorship paper produced the day before. Previously, the major portion of the processing had been done at the theater, adjacent to the Defense Attache Office Headquarters. The Plan which had called for 1500, 3000, or 6000 evacuees (including all Americans, third country nationals, and selected Vietnamese) had grown to 200,000 after President Ford's 11 April speech. After a meeting with Ambassador Martin on 12 April, Rear Admiral Benton, the representative of the Commander-in-Chief Pacific, with the Defense Attache Office, was told by the Ambassador to develop still another plan to evacuate up to 1,000,000. Planners then began working on this fantastic figure along with all the others noted above. As word of the new plan leaked out, an ever-increasing number of Vietnamese congregated inside the Defense Attache Office compound, creating the potential for a serious mob control problem. The Defense Attache Office Security Force of 39 retired, unarmed ARVN soldiers could not handle the crowds, so processing through the theater was ended on the evening of 19 April.

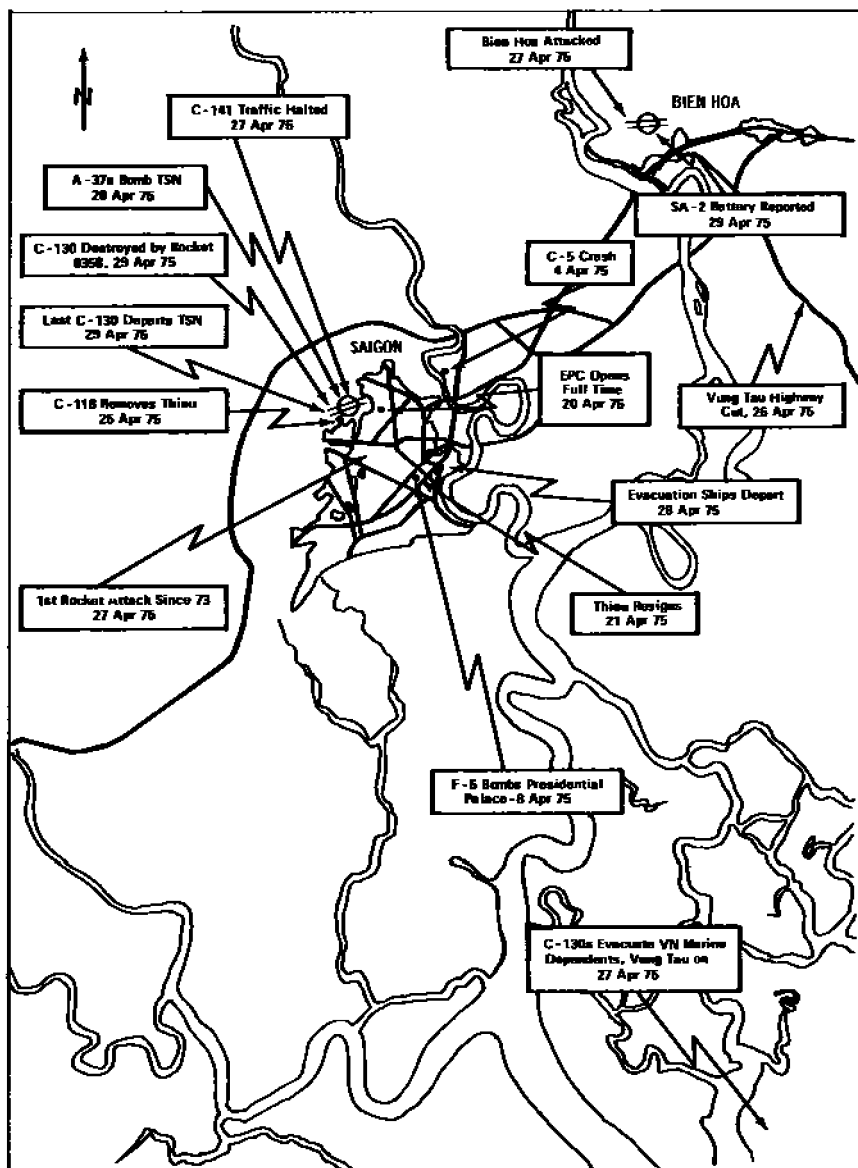


Figure 13. FLOOD TIDE, 20-28 April, 1975.

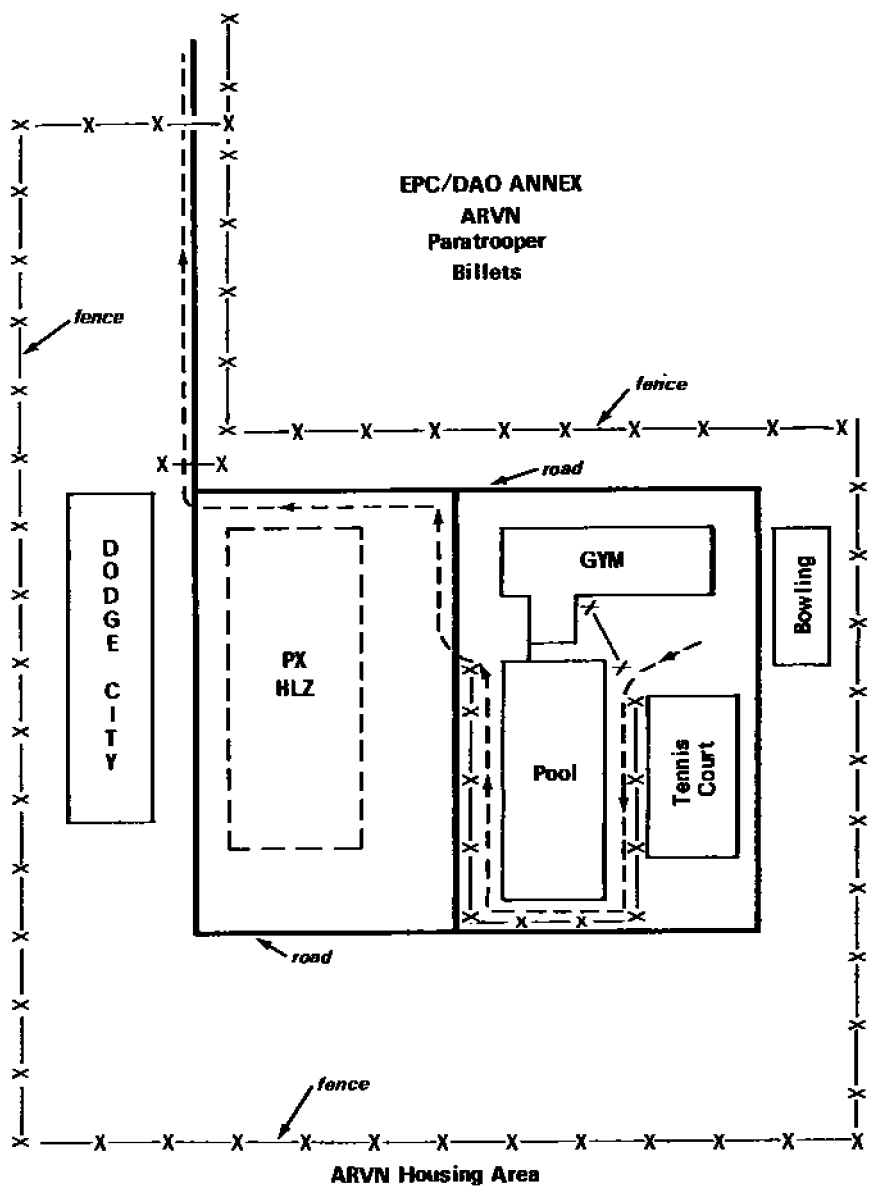


Figure 14. Configuration of the Evacuation Processing Center.

The basic arrangement of the Evacuation Processing Center is shown in figure 14. The location of the Center in relation to the Defense Attache Office-Tan Son Nhut complex is shown in figure 23. As noted earlier, the Annex area had been prepared by the Planning Group as a part of "Project Alamo" to handle up to 5000 persons each day. Those evacuees who were unable to process through the theater on 19 April led the initial flood of people into the Annex and to the gymnasium where processing of paperwork, manifesting, baggage checking, handling, and loading would take place. Workers from the US Consulate and the Defense Attache Office Personnel Division handled the paperwork aspects while Security Police and the Military Airlift Command Passenger Service personnel from Clark checked bags according to DOD anti-hijack procedures, loaded buses, and supervised evacuee movement from the Annex to the Tan Son Nhut flight line. There, members of the Supervisor of Airlift unit directed the loading aboard C-141s and C-130s. The Evacuation Control Center served as the coordinating link.

The plan was excellent—but, it did not work! The movement of passengers to the flight line was still agonizingly slow as processing personnel attempted to resolve unforeseen bottlenecks in the system. Complicating the matter was a mixup in aircraft scheduling. Airlift planners (out-of-country) wanted to send in C-141s at the rate of three per hour (31 scheduled for 20 April). The Defense Attache Office, knowing it could not handle that many aircraft, wanted only five C-141s on this first day. A compromise back to one C-141 per hour was directed by 22nd AF at Travis AFB, California. The local problem was that there was not enough designated room on the ramp to handle more than three C-141s at one time.

The C-141s arriving with military supplies for the South Vietnamese armed forces were experiencing delays on the ground greater than two hours, and undesirable situation in view of the uncertain conditions in and about Saigon. At 1700 hours on 20 April, four C-141s were on the ground at Tan Son Nhut, but there was no indication that passenger loads would be available from the Evacuation Processing Center. General guidelines from the Commander-in-Chief, Pacific, called for all C-141s to be airborne from Tan Son Nhut by darkness. If that guidance were to be followed, several C-141s would have to depart empty. At that point, Admiral Benton sent Lieutenant Colonel Hilgenberg to the Evacuation Processing Center to check on the situation. Colonel Hilgenberg reported:

I found the gymnasium processing area in near chaos as hundreds of VNs with a few American sponsors occupied the area making a reasonable flow of passengers impossible. After getting clearance to hold the aircraft for several hours, I assisted in forming four passenger loads.



Figure 15. Refugees awaiting processing at the Evacuation Processing Center (EPC).

Three aircraft left and the last was loaded and ready for takeoff when the Supervisor of Airlift, at Tiger Ops, reported that Vietnamese officials were preventing its movement. Investigation revealed that Brigadier General Tien, Commander of the South Vietnamese 5th Air Division at Tan Son Nhut, and a number of other senior Vietnamese immigration and National Police officials had surrounded the aircraft. The stated reason for stopping the flight was that illegal passengers were alleged to be aboard. Major Delligatti and his Supervisor of Airlift staff, along with American Security Police, prevented Vietnamese officials from boarding the aircraft. Major General Smith was notified, and the embassy was contacted. Officials at the Embassy quickly called Major General Binh, Chief of National Police, who ordered the release of the plane. The next day the price of the release of the C-141 was revealed. The families of Brigadier General Tien and several other key officials were evacuated to Clark. Similar problems were to arise in later days and the Americans continued to pay the normal ransom—evacuation of the families of Vietnamese military personnel or other government officials who were able to prevent the rescue of Americans. Bribes were of little use since, by 20 April, only departure from the country offered any real hope for the higher ranking Vietnamese officials.

During the night of 20 April, and the early morning of 21 April, the EPC staff completely revised processing procedures. The key change was to only allow sponsors to enter the gym to process all paperwork and complete passenger manifests while families remained outside. All loads were formed through a single gate at the swimming pool patio entrance, followed in sequence by baggage checks, holding,



Figure 16. Vietnamese Evacuees Awaiting Processing in the DAO Annex.



Figure 17. Refugees Passing Through the Baggage Check.

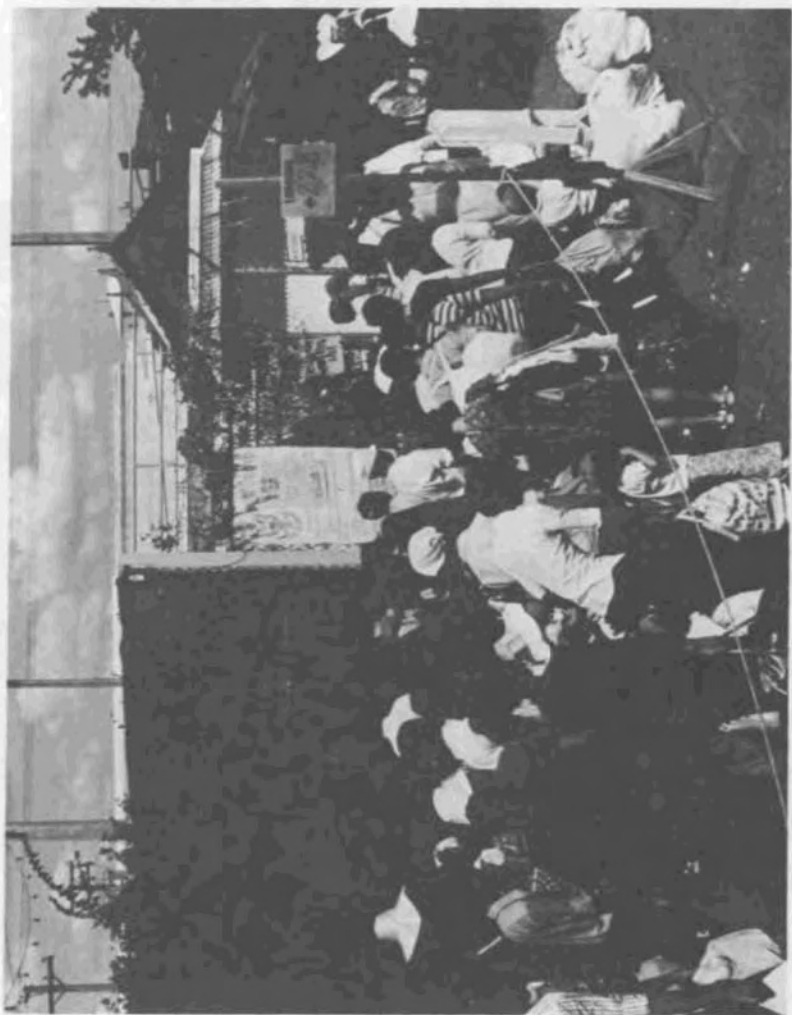


Figure 18. Evacuees in the Processing Line at DAO Annex.



Figure 19. Rapid Loading of Passengers on a USAF C-130E at Tan Son Nhut.

and bus loading (figure 11). This new procedure was used successfully for the remainder of the fixed-wing evacuation, though not without continual problems.

Lieutenant Colonel Hilgenberg reported his findings on the Evacuation Processing Center to Admiral Benton and identified a serious shortcoming on the 20 April operation. Previous general guidelines on what categories of Vietnamese could be evacuated had not been followed strictly. Instead of limiting evacuation to immediate family members, large groups of over 20, including distant cousins, in-laws, etc., were sometimes being taken out. An unconfirmed rumor circulated that some Americans were even sending maids and servants. If this situation were allowed to continue, moving the remaining Americans and legitimate Vietnamese would be a problem. Consequently, on 21 April, Mr. George Jacobsen of the US Embassy supplied Hilgenberg with definitive instructions as to who would be evacuated:

Sponsor and spouse;

Children of sponsor;

Children of spouse; and

Dependent parents of spouse;

All other categories such as brothers, sisters, cousins, aunts, uncles, in-laws, etc., were excluded.

Before opening on 21 April, Colonel Hilgenberg relayed this information to the Defense Attache Office workers in the Evacuation Processing Center. They then attempted to apply the criteria to the crowd already gathered in the Defense Attache Office Annex. The result was a near-riot. Many Americans who had waited in line all day on the 20th and others who arrived at the Annex after the curfew was lifted already had complete family groups with them. They well knew that prior departees had taken many more "dependents" than were now to be allowed. With little means of crowd control, it was apparent that application of the new criteria was hopeless. Thus, the Evacuation Processing Center began to evacuate the family groups listed on the sponsorship papers, once papers were stamped by the American Consulate.

The combination of the simplified evacuation paperwork, the liberalized interpretation of the qualifications necessary for evacuation and the relocation of the processing operation to the Annex all made for a very hectic day on the 21st. Vigorous efforts by American military men and civilians were required to impose a modicum of order on the pandemonium. Airplane-load groups were gradually formed according to manifests, but a good bit of confusion continued as the afternoon wore on.

At about 1600, a backlog of several thousand evacuees had formed in the Annex and were filling all the facilities designated for holding: the bowling alley (used as a nursery since it was air-conditioned), the

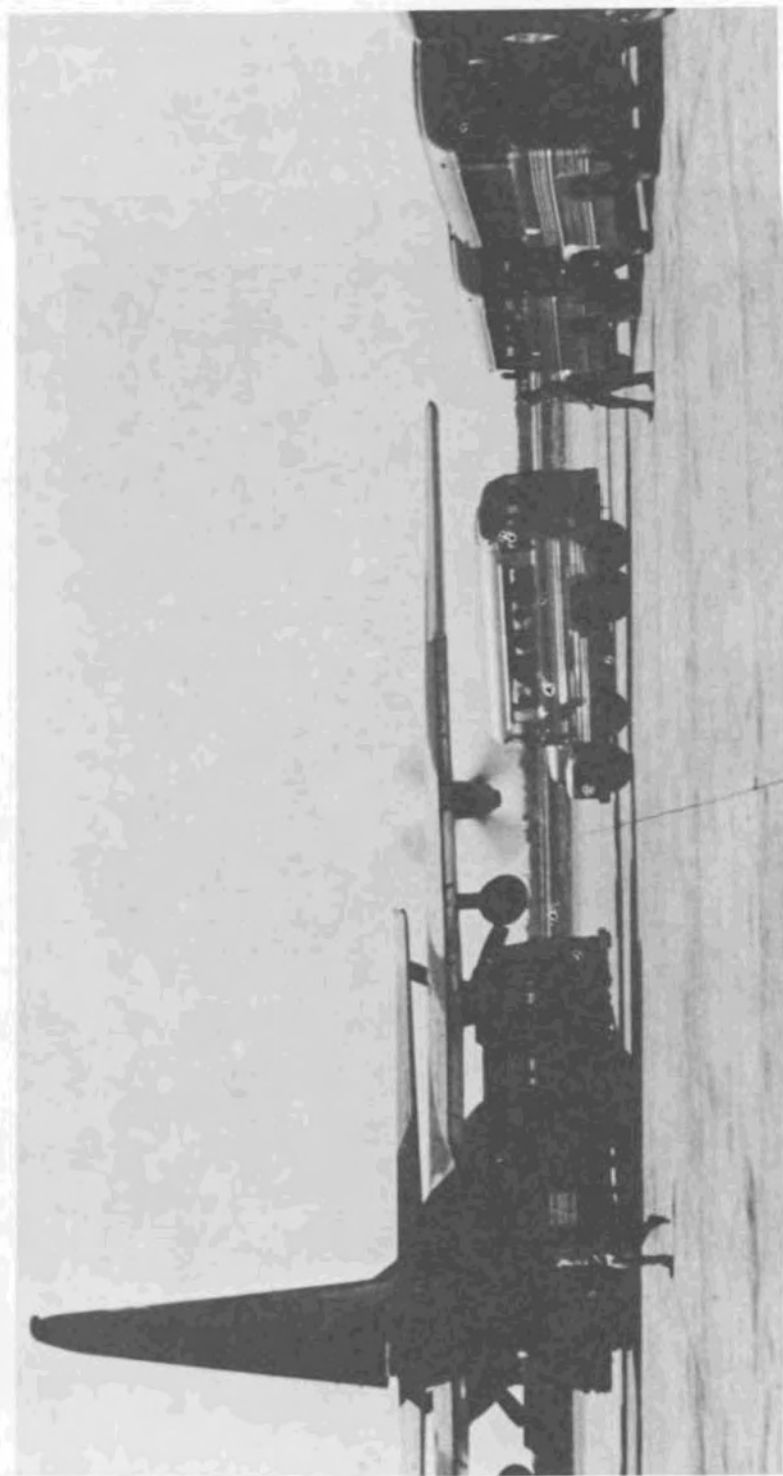


Figure 20. Vietnamese Scramble Aboard a C-130 Over its Rear Ramp, Tan Son Nhut.



Figure 21. Crowded Vietnamese Aboard a USAF C-141 Awaiting Takeoff at Tan Son Nhut.



Figure 22. VNAF Crewman and Families Disembarking From a Vietnamese C-130A at U Tapao AB, Thailand.

tennis courts adjacent to the pool, and most other outside areas where buildings provided shade and relief from daytime temperatures which reached into the high 90s. At about 1700, the Evacuation Control Center called to advise that the Evacuation Processing Center would commence round-the-clock operations using C-141s by day and C-130s by night.

The Military Airlift Command was gearing up for a maximum airlift. The Defense Attache Office had requested 26 sorties (72 seats each) for 21 April. The Military Airlift Command approved 21 sorties (94 seats each). The number of seats per aircraft was a subject of discussion in the Defense Attache Office. Everyone knew the C-141 could carry far more than 94 combat-loaded passengers. Apparently the tragic experience with combat loading on the C-5A was influencing the decision to put one passenger in one seat, despite the fact that a full-blown evacuation was in progress.

On the afternoon of 21 April, the most politically significant event yet occurred. President Nguyen Van Thieu announced his resignation. This proclamation gave a glimmer of hope for a negotiated settlement. Some officials thought that the Americans might then be permitted to leave on a controlled basis, but this proved to be a false hope.

As April 22 dawned, the Evacuation Control Center announced that 20 C-141s would arrive at 30-minute intervals during the day. The first two would haul out cargo, and the remainder would take 94 passengers each. At nightfall, 20 C-130s flying from U-Tapao AB, Thailand, would begin arriving at 30-minute intervals, each configured to carry 75 passengers. Simultaneously, the Military Airlift Command's 141s were moving a US Marine Corps Battalion Landing Team from Hawaii to Okinawa to serve as a reserve for the Marines deployed aboard Task Force 76 operating off the South Vietnamese coast.

The Evacuation Processing Center had proven during the prior 24 hours that it could handle far more evacuees than anticipated. But the operation was not without nagging problems which interrupted the flow of passengers and caused aircraft ground delays. Hilgenberg, now assigned to replace the officer in charge of the Evacuation Processing Center, gave this account of problems that surfaced on 22 April and recurred to the end:

By 22 April, informal day and night shift teams were set up at the EPC with Commander Bondi running the day shift while I worked nights. With overlap, shifts averaged 16-18 hours per day. In addition to the teams, many Americans and bilingual Vietnamese volunteered to work at various jobs while awaiting for their manifest number to come up. These volunteers proved invaluable as they worked as interpreters, briefers, baggage

handlers, and helpers in the nursery, food lines, manifesting areas, etc. Several Vietnamese doctors assisted the small medical section set up in the gym to handle whatever problems that arose. When their manifests came up the volunteers departed with their dependents and someone new would step forward to take their place. Since a substantial number of both military officers and DAO civilians had already departed Vietnam for many varied reasons, these full-time and part-time volunteers were indispensable to the overall effort. In other words, barring a large influx of personnel from outside RVN to run the evacuation, it simply could not have occurred without the volunteer help.

Bottlenecks occurred and were solved as they arose. Paperwork processing and manifesting were slow at the start but improved daily and caused no trouble later. Manifests had to be reproduced in three copies, after loads had been formed, to supply the aircraft crews, DAO personnel office, and the EPC. The Xerox machines needed for this became a key aspect. If they broke down, delays occurred until the one man left, a Filipino, could be found to make repairs. This type of problem, seemingly insignificant, grew in importance as the pace of the evacuation increased. Formation of flight loads inside the pool patio caused delays when families failed to show for their manifest call, then appeared later when other manifests were called. People on later manifests invariably clogged the gate when an earlier manifest was called and they had to be turned back. Gate crashers were a consistent problem. Manifesting and moving the crowd was easier said than done when the language barrier, near exhaustion and fear of the evacuees, especially without American escorts, were added. These problems were solved by greater use of interpreters and lineups of complete manifest groups prior to the call. Baggage checks performed by Clark AB Security Police, done in accordance with the DOD procedures initially, were modified later to speed up the process, while still providing necessary safeguards. Trucks to carry checked/sanitized baggage to the flight line were in short supply initially and several broke down, with no repair capability or replacements available. This stopped the whole system several times. We solved it by hot-wiring a group of Pacific Stars and Stripes delivery trucks which were then used for the remainder of the operation. Baggage ceased to be a problem. However, the two things needed to carry people to the flight line were buses and bus drivers. These proved to be constant problems. While there were usually sufficient numbers at night, buses often would be siphoned off for other uses during the day, causing shortages and aircraft delays. Driver shift changes caused a one to two-

hour gap twice a day and never were solved. Volunteers from the crowd drove during these periods. Toward the end, drivers staged periodic strikes. Their bargaining point was evacuation of their families. Once families left, the drivers worked until the end.

The Evacuation Processing Center was only one aspect of the effort, Lieutenant Colonel Laehr, Chief of the Air Operations Desk in the Defense Attache Office-Evacuation Control Center described the interface needed for continuous operations:

Capt Coburn and Maj Hensley manned the desk at Tiger Ops on a 24-hour basis handling all communications. While Col Mickler (newly assigned from NKP) and Maj Delligatti supervised the overall Supervisor of Airlift activity. Maj Goutte and I alternated as the Air Operations Officer in the ECC and coordinated with Capt Coburn and Maj Hensley on all activities related to aircraft scheduling, estimated times of arrivals and departures, actual times of arrivals and departures, seats available, number of people on each aircraft, etc. Most of the coordination was accomplished by a ring down telephone net. In coordination with the SOA, Capt Coburn and Maj Hensley were delegated the ultimate responsibility for the security of the C-141s and the C-130s. Maj Orrell was assigned to the DAO-EPC, working with Lt Col Jack Hilgenberg, and OIC of the EPC. Maj Orrell was the coordinator between the center and Tiger Ops for all manifested evacuees. Maj Orrell also coordinated through the EPC. Coordination was always a three way organizational process between the ECC, SOA, and EPC in the evacuation. Capt Shapira and Capt O'Brien, the two transportation specialists from Clark Air Base, controlled the ramp activities including aircraft parking, off-loading/on-loading and the control of all scheduled/unscheduled air freight.

On 22 April the "mini-ECC" in the Embassy began operations as more US agencies (other than Defense Attache Office) started to get serious about moving their people out. The interface between the Defense Attache Office and the Embassy's Evacuation Control Center was direct, via telephone or four radio nets.

A tremendous roadblock was thrown up in front of the evacuation effort on 23 April when a message from the Commander-in-Chief, Pacific, stated that President Marcos had decreed that no more than 200 evacuees could be in the Philippines at any one time. There were 5,000 evacuees in there when the announcement was made.

The Military Airlift Command and the Pacific Air Force suddenly had a dual requirement—continue the expanding evacuation from Saigon and move at least 5,000 refugees out of Clark to Guam,

Wake Island, and Yokota AB, Japan. Clark was no longer available as a disposition base, and the flexibility of airlift was put to a greater test as the Military Airlift Command called additional C-141 aircraft and crews forward.

Back in Saigon, a pattern was developing which only added to the problem of the loss of Clark as a staging base. It became apparent that, as long as the North Vietnamese Army held off from attacking Saigon or Tan Son Nhut, evacuees would keep showing up in ever-increasing numbers; with no end in sight, the fixed-wing evacuation could continue indefinitely. Initially, little effort was made to screen evacuees who had the sponsorship papers and once they succeeded in passing through Tan Son Nhut Gate 1, they proceeded to the Annex, were processed, and waited out the evacuation. The daily flow was always greater than the Evacuation Processing Center could handle, and by curfew each evening, a backlog of 3,000 or more evacuees built up in the Annex. Night operations were spent trying to reduce the backlogs as much as possible to prepare for the next day's rush.

By 24 April, Option I of FREQUENT WIND (now mostly military evacuation with decreasing commercial assistance) was in full swing, though still under Embassy control. Sealift remained a possibility both from Saigon and Vung Tau, though the latter option was tenuous. The North Vietnamese Army pushed toward Bien Hoa-Long Binh after its victory at Xuan Loc and threatened to interdict the Saigon-Vung Tau highway. The C-141 flow (20 per day) continued unabated and the C-130s now began operating from their home base at Clark (21 per night). Because of range limitations, the C-130s continued to land at Clark, either to refuel and proceed on to Guam, or release their passengers for movement to Guam in C-141s.

Another development in Saigon added to the already growing list of Vietnamese pleading for evacuation. Initially, little effort was devoted to evacuating Defense Attache Office and other Mission employees who had no family ties to Americans but whose lives would be endangered after a North Vietnamese takeover. On about 24 April a new paperwork device was introduced which made departure possible. It was a "certification letter" which, though never officially approved, was used extensively by all Mission agencies to evacuate Vietnamese employees and their families. It cited no sponsorship, but only certified that the sponsor was a US Government employee and requested asylum for the people listed. However, this letter was not normally enough to get the employees through Tan Son Nhut Gate 1. At this stage, the "underground railroad" was put to use. Previously this network was used to move intelligence and other sensitive evacuees on to Tan Son Nhut for evacuation on the

"Black Flights" described earlier. During the final 10 days, the "railroad" was used to move Mission employees, their families and selected families of South Vietnamese Air Force officers through Gate 1 and to the Evacuation Processing Center or directly to the flight line. This semi-covert operation worked until the night of 28 April when a 24-hour curfew was imposed. A system of "safe houses" and caravans was operated by a dedicated group of Defense Attache Office civilians led by a military officer and moved more than 1,000 Vietnamese on to Tan Son Nhut for their eventual evacuation. Without the "railroad" and the efforts of the people who ran it at their personal risk, few if any, of these 1,000 evacuees would have made it out of South Vietnam.

During the evacuation, the flow of aircraft was a key factor. As long as aircraft arrivals were close to schedule, the Evacuation Processing Center could keep pace and minimize ground delays. At times during the night, C-130s had less than 15 minute turn-arounds. Loading was done with engines running and passengers streamed directly from waiting buses in through the rear cargo doors (figures 19, 20). Baggage was quickly strapped down and the plane departed. However, when aircraft arrived intermittently, i.e., three or four within an hour, bunching occurred on the ramp and ground times of over an hour were experienced. There simply weren't enough workers and equipment, particularly buses, to handle the peaks. To remedy situations where the number of aircraft on the ground surpassed the capability of the normal processing system, pre-formed groups, all manifested and all checked, were sometimes moved directly to the flight line in their own buses or were added to the Evacuation Processing Center manifested passenger groups to speed up the processing and loading. While this procedure was inequitable in some ways, it was successful in filling aircraft with legitimate evacuees and getting the planes off Tan Son Nhut much more quickly than the formal system could have done it.

As FREQUENT WIND progressed, more and more Defense Attache Office divisions and Mission agencies (Embassy, USAID, USIS, etc.) struggled to get their people out. Competition was sparked by the fact that several of the agencies got an early jump and sent many of their people out before the rush started. Once the huge backlogs were built up, it was common for evacuees to process in and be placed on manifests, then have to wait 16-24 hours before boarding airplanes. This became a concern as certain groups of armed South Vietnamese Army and Air Force officers working with their respective service divisions stood in the line with their families until the dependents departed. These men were thus unavailable for duty and were out of the war for the waiting period—not that it made much difference in the end result.

The effect of the competition at the Evacuation Processing Center,

and to a lesser extent at the Supervisor of Airlift unit, was periodic harassment and accusations by those who were forced to wait in line for extended periods. Arthur Laehr explained the Evacuation Control Center and Air Attache's solution:

The ECC/EPC/SOA system worked fine with one major exception. With the "me first and you later" syndrome that exists in a time of panic, it was almost too late when we set up a desk to handle crowd control. Everyone wanted out "now" and wanted priority. Some demanded it. We established the following system and it worked. All groups were assigned a number, much the same as you take a number in a store when you want to be waited on. Groups that wanted priority had to go through Col McCurdy, the Air Attache, for approval and priority. If cleared, a priority number would be assigned by resolution between Col McCurdy and the crowd control officer in the ECC—I. Col McKinstry (USMC). Once assigned a number, the group would be assigned a holding area and told to stand by a telephone. When their turn came, depending on group size, the ECC coordinated a bus pickup and they were delivered directly to the flight line. The crowd control desk worked very closely with the Air Operations Officer on aircraft availability and number of seats available. Col McCurdy was located outside the ECC. This too was important. The bickering, harassments and arguments over who had priority were solved prior to Col McCurdy's call to the ECC. It's unfortunate it wasn't considered in the beginning. We also lost control at least once before we got the system set up.

Even though the competing agencies created some confrontations in the Evacuation Processing Center and sometimes diverted buses from the Center, their good points outweighed the bad. Most of them were well organized in planeload-sized groups. When they came forward with sponsors, they were quickly processed and carried to the flight line. Several groups held their people at locations other than the Annex and came to the Evacuation Processing Center when called by the processing team. This procedure worked best of all. Others proceeded directly to the flight line bypassing the Evacuation Processing Center.

Only South Vietnamese Air Force and Army personnel evacuated their dependents by air. The Vietnamese Navy evacuated few if any people from Tan Son Nhut. Since those South Vietnamese Navy dependents who departed South Vietnam did so by sea, very little data on the total number of South Vietnamese Navy escapees is available. Meanwhile, five US ships were standing by at the American dock area at Newport.

April 25 proved to be a very busy day for all involved in the

evacuation. First of all, the Federal Aviation Agency in Hawaii suddenly forbade more commercial flights into Vietnam. US airplanes complied, but foreign carriers continued to carry out maximum loads of evacuees. Responding to Colonel McCurdy's plea, the Commander-in-Chief, Pacific, won a reversal from the Federal Aviation Agency, but few commercial airliners ever returned.

By 25 April, the schemes to evacuate up to 6,000 people had been far surpassed, and earlier contingency plans to evacuate much larger numbers received renewed attention. At the US Support Activities Group-7th AF, the planning removal of 200,000 evacuees from Vietnam was completed on 25 April 1975. The 200,000 plan became Option V of FREQUENT WIND. This option assumed that the port area at either Saigon or at Vung Tau (along with the Saigon-Vung Tau ground route) would remain secure. Since the assumption proved false, the planning effort went to waste.

With Option V tentatively available, dependent on many assumptions, Washington contacted Saigon directly to provide authority to Ambassador Martin to implement Options II, III, or IV, or combinations, at the time of his choice. Evacuation forces were standing by on alert status off the coast of Vung Tau.

While the ships awaited further decisions, there were many additional noteworthy incidents taking place in Saigon on 25 April. The categories of refugees, alluded to earlier, were many and varied. Of course, there were legitimate Americans (US Mission employees, contractors, retired, or people just living in Saigon) and their families. Most of these had departed by 28 April. The majority of the Third Country Nationals processed were Koreans and Filipinos, although others went through the processing lines when they could not go commercially. The many varieties of South Vietnamese who left have already been discussed. One group bears further description. These were the young females who carried papers naming them as wives of Americans who previously served in Vietnam. These girls were usually easy to spot.

Early in the evacuation, thieves mingled with the crowds taking advantage of the congested conditions, and many evacuees lost valuables, especially jewelry. To prevent such thefts, women came through the lines wearing six or eight bracelets on each arm, a couple of rings on each finger and a dozen or more necklaces. Except for the seriousness of the situation, the scene would have been humorous.

Groups that definitely could not depart were South Vietnamese active duty personnel and draft-age male youths. On many occasions, male youths had to be turned back at the great anguish of families. But South Vietnamese Air Force and National Police personnel were continuing to spot-check buses en route to the flight line, and

confrontations over nonauthorized evacuees could have jeopardized the whole effort. Major General Smith gave specific guidance on this subject.

A few American military personnel stationed in the Western Pacific came to South Vietnam to rescue their families. These troops were some of the best volunteer workers while waiting for their manifests to come up. One USAF captain from Kadena AB, Okinawa, got his family out, then stayed an extra four days, working up to 20 hours per day, until his unit required his return. However, John Hilgenberg explained that not all Americans were as noble as the worthy captain.

Not all American sponsors were completely honorable. An unknown number of Americans evacuated with family groups, then returned on commercial airlines which were still running. They supposedly returned to help evacuate additional VNs. There were rumors of payoffs to get people out but I don't know of any that have been proven. It would have been possible. Another group to surface were possible deserters living in Saigon. I personally processed eight or ten who were very suspect, unfamiliar to any other American, and using outdated passports and ID cards. We had no authority or capability to handle these people in RVN, so we attached notes to the aircraft manifests requesting aircraft commanders to alert authorities at landing sites outside RVN. I never heard if any deserters were actually apprehended.

The evacuation of orphans continued throughout this period. Most went out directly from the flight line, with the Supervisor of Airlift unit handling arrangements, either at Air America or on the main ramp. Mr. Ed Daly, with his World Airways 727, made two of the later orphan flights on 21 and 25 April, carrying out 470 orphans and their escorts. Several small groups of orphans who made their way into the Evacuation Processing Center under supervision of an unknown Catholic priest, were taken out at opportune intervals with regular evacuees.

On 25 April, unknown to the Evacuation Processing Center personnel, a C-118 from Taiwan arrived after dark and parked on a secluded spot in accordance with arrangements made by the Embassy with the Supervisor of Airlift. Its loading and departure were supervised by the Embassy. The next day the Defense Attache Office learned that the plane had removed former President Thieu and his key people to Taiwan.

Also by 25 April, the crowds were starting to peak in the Annex area and there just were not enough military or civilian processing-security people to provide necessary checks to stop unauthorized

personnel from entering. Once in, it was impossible to find or sort them from the masses, unless they tried to crash the gates or board buses while not on manifests. Major General Smith requested a platoon of USMC troops to supplement the 13 Marines borrowed from the Embassy to provide minimum security in the Defense Attache Office complex. Once these 40 additional men arrived, security and control were improved. A series of checkpoints, prior to entry into the Annex, filtered out hundreds, perhaps thousands, of unauthorized evacuees who attempted to reach the Evacuation Processing Center.

On 26 April the Commander-in-Chief, Pacific, requested an additional C-130 squadron from the continental United States to help clear the congestion at Tan Son Nhut and among the islands. The request was approved, and a Little Rock AFB, Arkansas, Air Reserve unit deployed along with an en route support team from Dyess AFB, Texas. Guam was saturated with refugees and Military Airlift Command C-141s picking up C-130 loads at Clark for movement to Guam were held in the Philippines. Wake Island was approved as a processing point, and within hours over 1,000 evacuees were en route to that tiny island.

In Vietnam the evacuation was continuing without letup, but not without incidents. A C-130 had a nose gear collapse on rollout, blocking one of the runways. The Clark maintenance contingent on Tan Son Nhut and the flight crew made temporary repairs, and the aircraft flew back to Clark with the gear locked down. The most significant development and one that made large-scale evacuation more difficult was the cutting of highway QL-15 between Saigon and Vung Tau by the North Vietnamese forces. Option V with all its frantic work thus became history. Arthur Laehr explained how this loss led directly to another crisis for the Evacuation Control Center for 13th AF:

The South Vietnamese Marine Division (previously at Da Nang), regrouped at Vung Tau after the rout in MRs 1 and 2. They promised to fight to the end to secure the necessary areas required for the US evacuation plan if the US would evacuate their dependents. Lt Col Tony Lukeman (USMC) coordinated the operation. The Air Transportation desk in the ECC requested two C-130s to land at Vung Tau for the pick up of South Vietnamese Marine dependents. Clark AB command post called the ECC to confirm the use of Vung Tau AB which had been closed for some time. TSN was one thing but an unsecured airstrip was another story. I could tell they didn't believe our request. Major General Leroy Manor got on the horn to confirm the request. It took the entire day of the 26th to coordinate this with Clark AB. The pickup was to be made the next morning.

The condition of the airstrip was unknown. A quick call to Air America confirmed that the Vung Tau strip was usable. They briefed that only the south end of the runway was large enough for two C-130s to turn around and load. Due to runway conditions the approach could only be made to the south. Lt Col Lukeman, the Vietnamese Marine Corps coordinator in RVN, had great rapport with the Marines and proceeded to Vung Tau to assist them. By communicating with the ECC from there, he coordinated the pickups through Clark AB and monitored the C-130 pickup. The South Vietnamese Marines kept their word. They secured the area. Both C-130s evacuated a total of 183 Marine dependents without incident.

On the 27th, the stillness of the early morning was shattered by a series of rockets impacting in downtown Saigon and Cholon—the first since the ceasefire in 1973. The blasts killed ten people and started a huge fire which destroyed 500 homes, leaving 5,000 homeless. The explosions were heard in the Evacuation Processing Center and stirred up the crowd and the staff as well. For the first time, people really started looking for a place to hide. In the relatively open area, hiding places were sparse. From that time on, the nights were not as serene and peaceful as before. If the enemy gunners were in range of Saigon, they could also reach Tan Son Nhut. Simultaneously, heavy fighting erupted all around the capital and the base of Bien Hoa came under heavy attack. It was decided to end the C-141 flights and to use only C-130s—day and night.

At the outset of FREQUENT WIND, passenger loads had been limited to 94 for the C-141s and 75 for the C-130s. By now, the peacetime rules had been dropped, and standard loads of 180 were being prepared for both aircraft. The Supervisor of Airlift reported loads as high as 316 on a C-141 and 243 on the C-130. Aircrews reported C-130 loads of more than 260. Thus, the elimination of the C-141 did not make a big difference.* Of course, this would not have been so had the crews and their superiors been willing to recognize the

*This was true for this particular set of circumstances and would not apply in many other situations. The distance to Clark was only about 1,000 miles and thus well within the range capabilities of the C-130. Had it been greater, the use of the C-141s for their range (and for their speed) would have been more necessary. Had it been necessary to move out heavy loads of cargo, then the advantages of the C-141 would have been more decisive. Finally, the concurrent requirement to move larger numbers of people over the 1,400 mile leg from Clark to Guam and the 2,700 mile one from the Philippines to Wake made the division of labor an efficient one. The slightly faster turnaround time and the requirement of the C-130s to land at Clark, along with the greater speed and range advantages of using the C-141s on the longer over-water routes may well have made this the most efficient arrangement. In addition, the ever present danger of rocket or mortar attack which could close portions of the runways caused us to favor the short takeoff C-130 at this stage of the evacuation.

emergency nature of the operation and to violate the peacetime operational rules.

Outside Vietnam, the situation at Guam was serious. The island was completely saturated and greater numbers of refugees were sent to Wake Island than originally planned. To relieve the growing congestion on Guam, a short-duration staging area and processing center was set up at Travis AFB, California, and increased airlift to the US through Hickam AFB, Hawaii was started.

As noted earlier, five large evacuation ships had been stationed at Newport to provide sealift. An earlier plan to evacuate up to 30,000 from Newport was rejected by Ambassador Martin on 24 April on the grounds that it could panic the population and contribute to the collapse of the government, the key thing the Ambassador was trying to prevent. Other plans to move evacuees by road to Vung Tau, then to evacuate by sea, were quickly dropped when North Vietnamese forces cut the Saigon-Vung Tau highway on 26 April. At first light on 28 April, four Military Sealift Command deep draft ships sailed from Newport and Cat Lai (near Saigon) to Vung Tau. This was done because of the increasing numbers of North Vietnamese in the vicinity of Saigon and threats of riots in the city. Another option was gone. By the afternoon of 28 April, only an LST, three tugs, and four barges remained near Newport for emergency loading.

During Monday, the 28th, the evacuation progressed at a rapid rate as the priority and quota systems were working as planned. Preformed groups were quickly processed and moved to the flight-line. On the previous day, 7,578 were evacuated, and the Evacuation Processing Center expected to top this figure as the day wore on. Newly appointed President Nguyen Van "Big" Minh completed a national radio-TV speech at about 1800. At 1806, three A-37s bombed the Tan Son Nhut flight line, destroying several aircraft and badly damaging base operations. The timing of the bombing emphasized that the North Vietnamese could strike hard at any time. The bombing added insult to injury, since the attackers flew captured South Vietnamese aircraft.

The Supervisor of Airlift contingent, which had just loaded a C-130 minutes before, witnessed the entire raid and related that:

A flight of three A-37s equipped with MK-81 (250 lb) ordnance attacked the flight-line area of TSN. A total of six bombs hit the VNAF parking area, destroying numerous aircraft. . . . No USAF aircraft were damaged. The A-37s were equipped with both tip and four underslung wing tanks. Dive bomb tactics were used with an estimated roll-in altitude of 5000 feet and a releasable altitude of 2500 feet. Pullout was estimated to be below 2000 feet.

Several South Vietnamese Air Force F-5s took off to chase the A-37s, but they never caught them.

A loaded C-130 took off shortly before the attack and reported heavy ground fire on climbout and resorted to violent evasive tactics. Most of the ground fire, 37mm AAA and 51 caliber machine guns, came from the vicinity of Tan Son Nhut and Saigon, suggesting the possible hostility of the panic-stricken South Vietnamese Air Force. Captain Ken Rice, 374th Tactical Airlift Wing, Clark AB (C-130 Aircraft Commander) described the action:

After takeoff, we made a right turn-out instead of the normal left turn because the A-37 was off to the left side and we could see that if we had made the left turn, he'd have been right in formation with us. So we turned out to the right, stayed low and flew over the river. . . . As we got down to the north and west of the city, we started taking ground fire from the opposite bank of the river. So we immediately turned and headed toward the city. We thought we'd fly over the city and exit that direction. As we flew over the city, they (the ARVN gunners) just opened up on us. There was ground fire from every direction. It was like the 4th of July. So we started an immediate climb into a thunderstorm that was right over the city at the time. We finally got in the clouds and in the storm, which was no fun either, but it was better than being shot at. The navigator got on his radar and directed us around the heaviest parts and we flew in the clouds to the bay. . . .

A second C-130 pilot, 1st Lt Fritz Pingle, who took off shortly before Rice did, gave his account of the situation:

I wasn't quite as lucky as Ken was. When I took off I was thinking left turn over the city using the city as the little bit of refuge we did have. And after I got airborne and the A-37 made its second approach, the one that Ken saw off the left of him, was to the left of me and decided to fly a little formation with me. He pulled into our 8 o'clock position and we had scanners in each door, and the scanners kept saying, "He's coming at us, he's coming at us." I didn't know what to do, it was a helpless feeling—I had full power and I had gone down to 500 ft, which was the pre-briefed evacuation route, following the river out like Ken talked about. I tried going through every cloud I could find and it was just like when you wanted a cloud, there wasn't any—just like when you needed a cop, he wasn't there. Meanwhile, I was down at 500 ft doing about 280 kts which is pretty fast that close to the ground with that big airplane. We got out and the last time we saw the A-37 he made a couple of passes although we never saw him fire at us. He moved into our 6 o'clock position right when we hit the coast. We don't know when he left us then because the scanners lost

sight of him. He must have broken off. The first time we really relaxed, we were about 50 miles from the coast and there was an electronic C-135 up there. He spotted us and he visually confirmed that the guy wasn't on our tail anymore. That's the only time I said a four letter word over the radio, when I made a guard broadcast once we took off—that the airfield was under attack. And as Col Wolfe said, we had airplanes coming in every twenty minutes. I didn't want to get any more involved in there. The copilot at the time called back to Clark Airways on High Frequency communications. Clark Airways said, "Aircraft calling—please stand by, you're interrupting!" The copilot said, "Clark Airways, I don't care who you're talking to—shut up and listen, this is what's happening!" So we finally got the message back to everybody. Meanwhile, Ken and the other airplanes on the ground got airborne and we were already contacting other aircraft that came in and it was a temporary halt that evening—some of the airplanes turned right back—some went into holding.

Art Laehr gave this version of the attack from his position in the Evacuation Control Center:

The impact of six 250 lb bombs generated many inputs to the ECC that TSN was under attack. During the preceding one-half hour before the attack we had six US transports on the ground at once due to processing problems or transportation problems. By hard work and coordinating with the EPC and Tiger Ops, every aircraft was airborne when the bombs hit. We were lucky. The last C-130 took heavy small arms fire after takeoff. Immediately after the bomb hit, I called Clark AB command post to warn them that TSN was under attack. It was amazing how fast the inbound flow of C-130s stopped. Shortly thereafter the ECC was told by local authorities to reactivate the C-130s since the bombing appeared to be an isolated incident. Now things got interesting. I called the Clark command post. They informed me that NKP had shut off the flow. I called NKP command post and they informed me that they would start the flow when they deemed it safe and necessary and that we didn't control the aircraft. We found out that Saigon had little or no control over the entire effort (at least at that particular time).

Though the airlift had stopped temporarily after the attack, two C-130s continued holding east of Tan Son Nhut. At 2000 they were cleared in, picked up their passenger loads (300 total), and departed without incident. At the same time, Clark commanders decided to resume the flow of C-130s. Also, the Government of Vietnam imposed a 24-hour curfew after the attack. This reduced the flow of evacuees to near zero. About 3,000 evacuees were in the Evacuation

Processing Center. At 2100 Maj Gen Smith relayed the word through the Evacuation Control Center that 60, C-130 sorties were scheduled for 29 April to evacuate a planned 10,000 people.

John Hilgenberg reported these reactions to the situation in Saigon:

Sitting in the tense quietness of the EPC at midnight, I personally thought that such a plan was far too ambitious to be realistic. Artillery exchanges were drawing closer each day and seemed to anticipate that the end was very near. Tan Son Nhut just couldn't be kept open much longer. Our anxiety was well founded when we learned that all DAO buses designated for surface evacuation were deployed on alert status in downtown Saigon. We all knew that when the buses went on full alert, a final big push to finish the evacuation effort was imminent. With this in mind, we began to organize for a maximum effort shortly after midnight on 29 April 1975,

Chapter VI. The Last Flights From Saigon: Frequent Wind's Helicopter Phase, 29-30 April

The situation at Saigon and Tan Son Nhut was grim in the early hours of Tuesday, 29 April. The government-imposed, 24-hour curfew was maintaining a shaky calm, but the calm only promised to hold as long as security forces maintained their posts. That was a very questionable promise, especially in view of earlier events in Da Nang and elsewhere, and the fact that the population of Saigon had swelled to somewhere over four million with the influx of refugees and many members of former South Vietnamese armed forces units.

At the US Support Activities Group-7th AF headquarters in Thailand, Lt Col Tom Tobin described the staff's continuous anxiety:

Lieutenant General J. J. Burns, Commander USSAG/7AF, Major General Archer, USAF, Chief of Staff, and Major General Hunt, USA, maintained a constant vigil, analyzing and studying all intelligence data and talking frequently to Major General Smith and Colonel William E. Legro (USA), Chief of DAO Intelligence Branch, via telephone. From 22 April through the early morning hours on 29 April, the Saigon atmosphere seemed frightening and was complicated by the relative calmness and the lack of hard intelligence data. What were the NVA leaders and forces waiting for? Were we being given some time to get our people out of Vietnam?

Surrounding Saigon, but in unknown positions, were somewhere around 14 North Vietnamese Army divisions composed of 150,000 to 200,000 troops, nearly all of them combat soldiers. From the viewpoint of arriving American aircrews, the North Vietnamese forces posed a serious threat with weapons consisting of SA-7 surface-to-air, hand-held missiles and a variety of conventional Anti-aircraft Artillery including 23mm, 37mm, and radar-directed 57mm and 85mm guns. Reports revealed that at least one SA-2 missile

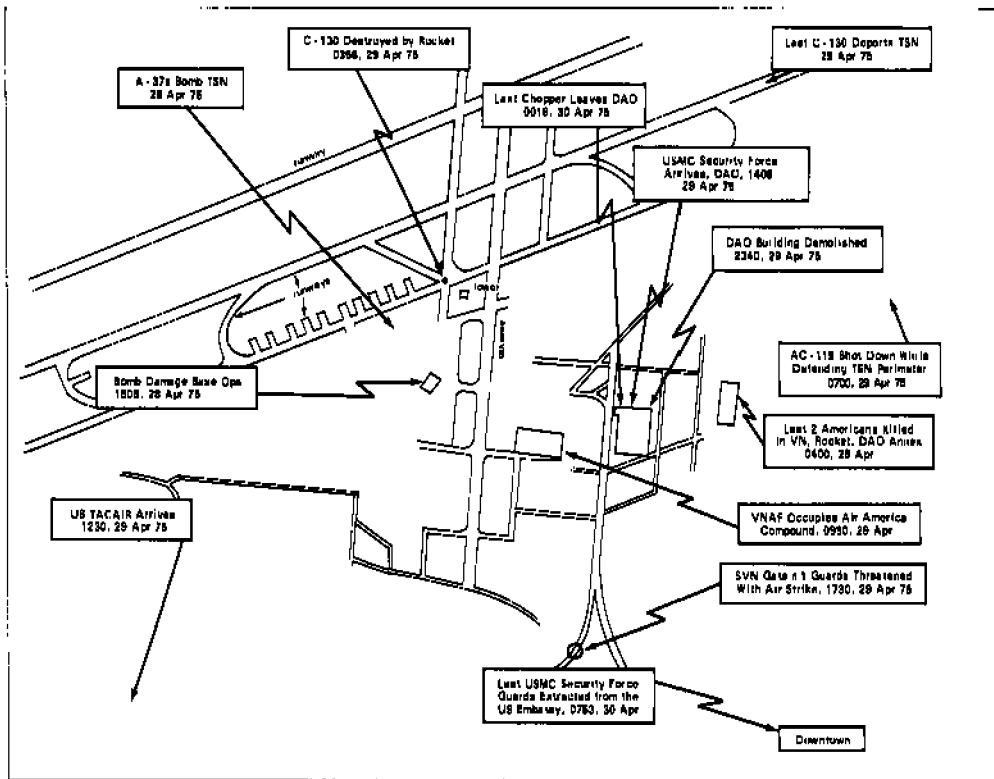


Figure 23. The Last Flights From Saigon.

battery was set up in the newly captured Bien Hoa area, 18 miles away.

As far as the US mission was concerned, all possible planning and preparation for the final exodus was accomplished. Only the evacuation of the Embassy itself was in question—though the rooftop helicopter pad was set for extraction. The buses for surface evacuation from the city to Tan Son Nhut were sitting on alert at designated locations. Air America aircraft and crews were ready for air extraction from specified, well-prepared rooftops in the city. The Tan Son Nhut flight line, though much more tense than before the previous day's bombing, was still open. Many thousands of South Vietnamese Air Force personnel and their families, refugees from other bases throughout the country, were huddled on Tan Son Nhut near the flight line. These people posed a threat to any airlift planned from the airfield itself. Nearly all the remaining aircraft that the South Vietnamese Air Force had left were parked in close congestion all over the available ramps and revetments, many double and triple parked. They presented extremely lucrative targets, not only for rockets and artillery, but for sappers as well.

The Defense Attache Office staff was preparing for the 60 sortie, 10,000 person, C-130 evacuation planned for the day. While the Defense Attache Office building contained mostly Americans, the Annex still held about 3,000 evacuees, mostly Vietnamese, who were temporarily trapped since the bombing interrupted the C-130 traffic. At 2000 (28 April) the Evacuation Control Center advised the Evacuation Processing Center and Supervisor of Airlift unit that the airlift would resume at 2330. This estimate was revised to 0030, then 0130 on 20 April as the night progressed. In anticipation of the large number of aircraft due in, and taking advantage of the break in arrivals, Hilgenberg directed that eight complete 180-person loads be formed to provide a headstart on the arrivals. At 0200 three manifested loads were put on buses and taken to the flight line to await the first C-130 arrivals, which had slipped to 0300 by that time. Five manifested loads were segregated in the Evacuation Processing Center in designated holding areas. They were awaiting return from the flight line of the only buses available to the Evacuation Processing Center operation. The remaining 2,500 people in the Annex area were being organized by manifests to provide for rapid processing.

Between 0300 and 0330, three C-130s landed. All carried high explosives (BLU-82, 15,000 pound bombs). They had to unload in the ordnance storage area north of the Tan Son Nhut runways. At 0358, one aircraft was loading with passengers and getting ready to depart. The second was about to start its loading, while the third was taxiing toward the ramp loading area. It never made it! Numerous 122mm rockets began to fall all over Tan Son Nhut, the Defense

Attache Office complex, and the surrounding area. One of the rockets impacted just under the wing of the taxiing C-130, disabling it instantly and setting the aircraft on fire (figure 24). Miraculously, no one was severely injured; the crew of the 21st Tactical Airlift Squadron of Clark, cleared the burning wreck quickly and, aided by the Supervisor of Airlift personnel and Security Police in the loading area, jumped aboard the empty second aircraft. The two remaining planes taxied immediately and took off in the midst of the heavy barrage, which was now beginning to zero in on the Tan Son Nhut airfield complex.

Captain Arthur Mallano, a C-130 pilot from Clark AB, Philippines, on the ground during the rocket attack, had a ringside seat for the fireworks. His description starts while he was still at Clark AB, Philippines:

One thing I want to bring up here, after the attack on the airfield that night with the A-37s bombing the field, the airlift didn't stop there. There was a period of 12-15 hours that we



Figure 24. USAF C-130 Hit by Rocket Fire at Tan Son Nhut AB During the Early Hours of 29 April 1975.

still were going to go back into Saigon and bring out more and more refugees. For example, when Fritz got off the ground there at TSN and radioed to Clark and said 'the field's under attack by an airstrike,' I was at base ops filing. They cancelled my mission. This was to be the fifth time I was to go in there and as I started walking out the door, they recalled me, gave me a new mission, a new airplane, with cargo on it for Saigon, and put me in the airplane. We took off at 1230 local (sic) (0030 local?). We landed at TSN, after the field was under attack by the A-37s. The damage when we landed—you could not see any damage . . . We unloaded our cargo, then we experienced about an hour on the ground at TSN, which at the time, I didn't really relish, just sitting there. When we started getting the people on the back of our airplane, I think there were 4 airplanes on the ground, one on the takeoff roll. (The aircraft rolling was a VNAF C-130. Only three USAF C-130s landed at this time.) I was sitting there getting loaded, and another guy had just pulled up next to me and opened his ramp and door to receive passengers. Another plane was just pulling off the active. It was at that time—0358 the morning of 30 April—I know that time and I'll never forget that time—is when we thought at first it was lightning in the background. You know the whole sky kind of lit up and I said to the copilot, 'Gee, that thunderstorm is getting a little closer. It's moving toward the field.' The next thing I know, not only was it white, it was red, blue, green—it had different colored rockets and mortars and it was hitting the field. I want to emphasize this point, it was hitting the field with accuracy. They were not just firing to scare us. They immediately hit a fuel truck, they immediately hit the control tower, they immediately hit the airplane that had turned off the runway. Half the runway went in the first 5 minutes of the rocket attack. When I saw the intensity of the rocket attack and the accuracy with which it was hitting the field, I immediately told the loadmaster, 'Let's get the last passengers on.' We did! We did not wait for baggage at all. We started taxiing out. We had over 260 people on the airplane. The rockets were hitting to the left, the right, behind, and in front of us. I tried to take off on the taxiway and was going to, except that I remembered the antiaircraft site at the end of the taxiway, with the big guns sticking up. I figured just about the time I get this mother airborne and got the gear up, I'm going to run right into that son-of-a-gun. At that time I took the runway. The loadmaster was in the back. All I remember is the loadmaster screaming. I thought somebody had died back there. We were already in flight idle (a C-130 power setting normally used only in flight), taxiing down the taxiway. We went to military power and took

off, with the rockets hitting right behind us, right in front of us, right on the sides. At that time the USAF C-130 that was hit blew up. Let me tell you—I thought we had lost a crew in that airplane. I didn't see any time for the crew to evacuate. That was Capt Larry Wessel's, I believe, that got hit. Thank God the rocket hit under the wing spilling fuel. They recognized the situation immediately and said, 'this is it, we're getting out.' If they hadn't gotten out when they did, I'm sure they would have been killed in the fire. The bad part was that after we got airborne, we were heavy—we had all those people. The plane on the ground next to me that was waiting for passengers—Wessel's crew ran over to them—they immediately took off behind us. They beat us to altitude. They were at 22,000 feet, and I was still passing 6,000. (The fast climbing C-130 was piloted by Capt Greg Chase and was the last USAF fixed-wing aircraft to leave TSN.)

Arthur Laehr described his impression of the attack:

Intelligence had warned us that we would be hit by rockets and artillery on the 29th. However, we had been issued the same warning for two or three days in a row. I guess the 'cry wolf' story pervaded our thoughts. Rather than sleep in the DAO complex the night of the 28th, I returned to my trailer.

I should mention that I firmly believe the NVA were ready earlier. I think they waited until we got our numbers down to the point where we could make the helicopter evacuation work.

One of the first rockets hit near DAO killing two US Marines. It was nearly a direct hit. When the first rocket hit it woke me up. Another rocket hit the gymnasium area as I looked out the window of my trailer. A sick feeling ensued as I knew the EPC was located in that area. A third rocket hit in the vicinity of the DAO compound. It impacted within six feet of the Generals' quarters 1 and 2 and blew all the occupants (14 personnel) out of bed while collapsing much of one wall. There were no injuries.

To this, John Hilgenberg added:

During this initial attack, a series of rockets fell in the DAO complex. One of the first hit on top of the gym handball court sending myself and the remaining workers and evacuees diving for what little cover was available. The explosion occurred within 25 meters of at least 1,500 people grouped around the gym, scattered metal roofing in all directions, and set the gym afire. Miraculously, no one was hurt. The DAO Fire Department quickly extinguished the blaze.

A second rocket hit about 100 yards away across from the Dodge City billeting, injuring two evacuees sleeping on the grass. These two were treated by the Army medics and one civilian doctor working in the gym dispensary.* Another hit across the road in the Air America parking area, destroying several aircraft contemplated for use in the evacuation. Maj Dellegatti of the SOA, who was enroute back to Tiger Ops, had spoken briefly to the Marine guards only five seconds before the impact killed them. These two were the only known US citizens killed on Vietnamese soil during the entire evacuation. Two Marine helicopter pilots perished in a helicopter ditching at sea.

From 0430 till the final lift-off the next morning more than 24 hours later, a multitude of things happened, many of them simultaneously. A chronological organization will be used hereafter. The rockets and what sounded like heavy artillery continued throughout the day with the greatest concentration of 40 rounds per hour between 0430 and 0800. Following the initial barrage, which seemed to hit indiscriminately in and around the Tan Son Nhut area, the rocket fire became more and more concentrated on the flight line and fuel and ammo storage areas. In fact, after about 0430, no one remembered any more rockets hitting in the Defense Attache Office Compound or Annex.

John Hilgenberg continues his narration of action in the Annex:

In the EPC, our first action was to get the crowds down and under cover, yet to remain organized in groups for rapid movement. Not surprisingly, the VNs knew exactly what to do to protect themselves from the rockets, but once the attack subsided, they grew progressively more difficult to control. Here is where the USAF Security Police and several assigned Marines were invaluable. As I observed throughout the evacuation, reaffirmed later in the day, an American in uniform was a powerful, reassuring control force, much more effective than an American in Civilian clothes, even one who could speak the language of the evacuees.

On the flight line near Tiger Ops, the Supervisor of Airlift group and members of the Combat Control Team began investigating and reporting on the condition of the airfield. This action was extremely

*The latter was Dr. Jim Mayers from Hawaii who originally came into Vietnam to assist in evacuating orphans, then stayed on to help in the big evacuation. He was the only doctor readily available in the EPC and performed in outstanding fashion. Several of the pictures in the back were taken by Dr. Mayers and given to the Air Force for historical purposes.

hazardous as rocket impacts were now concentrated there. Col Earl Mickler, USAF, was serving as Supervisor of Airlift at Flying Tiger Operations on the flight line when the rocket attack started and directed initial reporting. He described the action of one man in particular, Captain Bill O'Brien, USAF, on temporary duty to Saigon from the Clark AB Aerial Port:

When the bad guys started shooting at us, Bill was least impressed—that is to say it was obvious he had been there before. Whenever we needed to know the status of the airfield, runways, taxiways, etc., it was always 'Obie' who went out to check. There were several times when leaving the doubtful sanctuary of a building was not easy, but he went, usually without my asking. If we had a decision to make about whether or not to continue operations, he just accepted the fact that we needed to check, put on his hat and did it. During those final hours, Bill was, with the radios in his jeep, our only real contact with what was happening on the flight line. He was right in the middle of the chaotic mess and stayed there calmly reporting conditions until I ordered him out . . . When I finally told Bill to get out, all hope of continuing airlift was gone and he was under fire not only from rockets and artillery, but was surrounded by the wild, uncontrolled melee on the ramp—Vietnamese were running around looking for a reason to shoot someone. Bill came out very slowly, moved all the way over the tower to pick up one of his enlisted types in place there, then back to Flying Tiger Ops to meet with the rest of our people.

First Lieutenant Richard Coleman, USAF, Assistant Officer-in-Charge for the Clark Security Police detachment was on the flight line with evacuee buses when the rocket attack started, then returned later to check on several of his personnel. He had been through rocket attacks when stationed at Bien Hoa some time before, but admitted he had never seen one that lasted as long. He observed the activities of the South Vietnamese Air Force as they began their own evacuation using C-130s, C-119s, C-7s, and helicopters. The scene was ugly as people fought to board the aircraft. Some were pushed off the C-130 ramps as aircraft taxied. One C-130 took off on a parallel taxiway. Another took off on the old north-south runway and barely cleared the old airfield control tower on climbout. A C-7 tried to take off on one engine and spun off the runway into the grass infield and burned. It appeared that most of the passengers got out, but no one bothered to check. As it began to get light, South Vietnamese Air Force F-5s and A-37s were fired up and took off, not to continue the fight, but to fly to U-Tapao, Thailand. Many jettisoned their external fuel tanks and ordnance on the active runway.

Tiger Ops confirmed this happening and also reported an abandoned F-5 blocking the entrance taxiway to the Tiger Ops ramp and passenger loading area. About 40 vehicles and several hundred South Vietnamese were occupying the runway area in an attempt to board two South Vietnamese Air Force C-130s that were trying to launch. Coleman reported seeing F-5s overhead and thought he saw a wingman turn on his lead in a typical dog fight.

The above description makes the South Vietnamese Air Force look all bad, but this was not the case. At least one AC-119 Gunship (figure 25) was up most of the night expending flares and ordnance on the advancing enemy. He landed, refueled, rearmed, and took off again about daybreak to resume the fight. Shortly after daybreak two A-1s were airborne and cruising the perimeter of Tan Son Nhut at about 2500 feet, apparently "trolling"* for gunfire. They kept up their patrol for several hours. It was reported later that one of the A-1s had been downed by an SA-7 missile, fired by North Vietnamese Army troops near Tan Son Nhut. Almost everyone out-of-doors watched the single AC-119 as it continued to fire on the North Vietnamese Army Troops just off the east end of Tan Son Nhut. At about 0700, the gunship was also hit by an SA-7, broke up, and plummeted to earth in flames. Lt Coleman reported he saw three chutes from the plane, but one became entangled in flaming debris and the chute burned. A letter from former South Vietnamese Air Force major to Mr. Clyde Bay, the Nha Trang evacuee mentioned earlier, told of South Vietnamese Air Force pilots still flying sorties and bombing tanks right in the approaches to Saigon on the morning of 30 April. There were some truly authentic Vietnamese heroes who fought to the very last in a losing battle.

To return to the scene at the Evacuation Processing Center, John Hilgenberg recounts:

During these early hours while TSN was deteriorating into chaos, the EPC became a scene of stagnation. Several buses full of evacuees who were to leave on the C-130 hit on the ramp, were returned and rejoined the other in the Annex. I checked with the ECC for some kind of word on the next move, but the situation was unsettled and no firm decision was made. The remaining SPs, Marines, and civilian volunteers were maintaining order and keeping the previously formed groups in line, just in case fixed-wing operations resumed. The crowd was tense but controllable. However, when the AC-119 went down at 0700, you could see a new phase of depression set in. When I realized SA-7s were almost on the perimeter of TSN, I personally felt

*Tactic designed to cause enemy gunners to reveal their positions by exposing one's own aircraft as bait by low, slow flight over the general area of the anti-aircraft artillery emplacements.

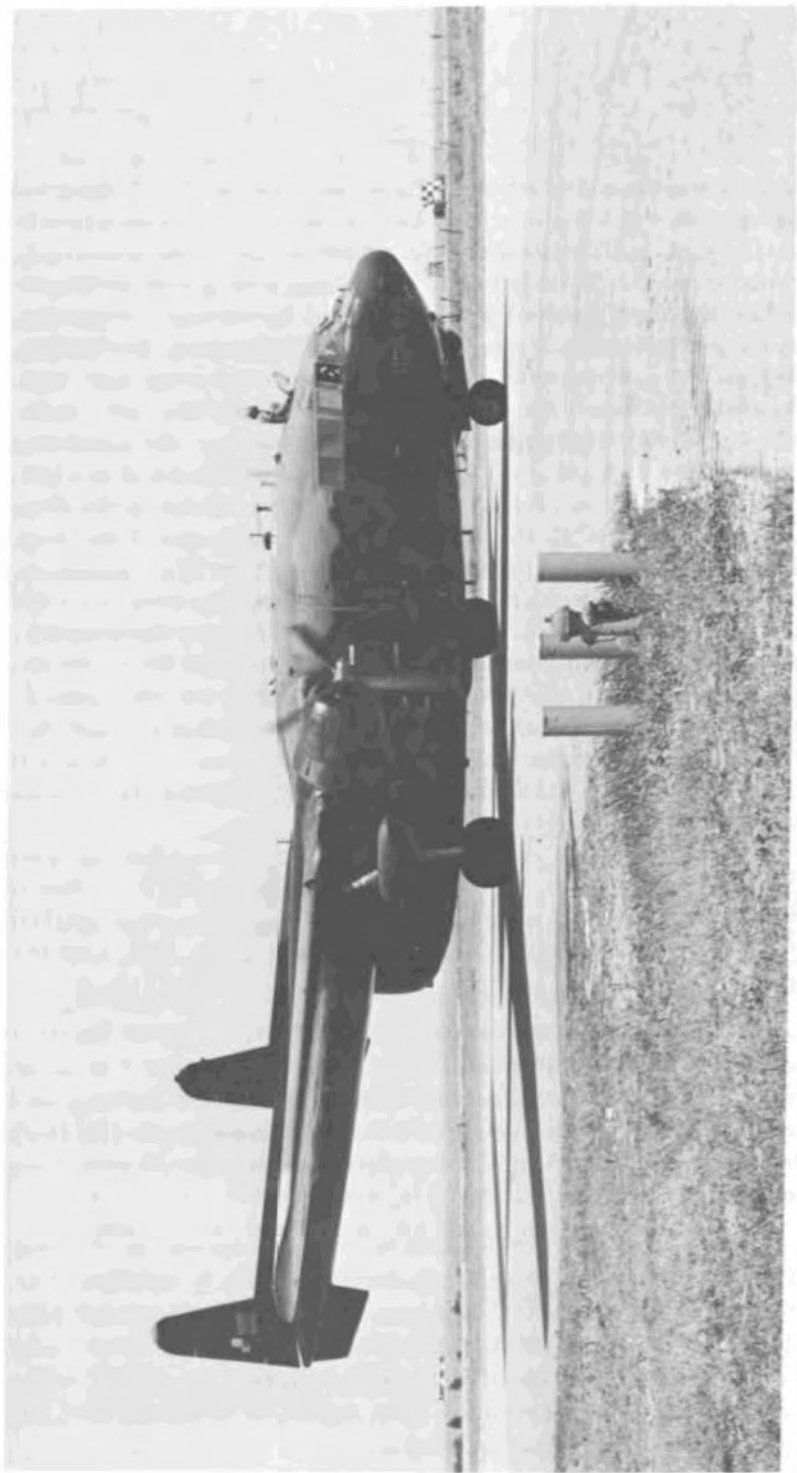


Figure 25. VNAF AC-119 Preparing for Last Ditch Defense of Saigon.

that the fixed-wing lift was over and that even a helicopter extraction would be hazardous and costly. To reduce some of the anxiety, I directed that all remaining evacuees be manifested and formed into planeload groups. It was a token gesture but seemed to reduce some of the open fear.

During these activities on the flight line and at the Evacuation Processing Center, things in the Evacuation Control Center were developing rapidly. Despite the early reports of chaos on the airfield, higher headquarters directed that fixed-wing evacuation would resume. Reportedly, President Ford convened an emergency meeting of the National Security Council, which decided that if the shelling stopped by dawn, fixed-wing aircraft should continue for one more day. It would remove "high-risk South Vietnamese," the staff of the Defense Attache's Office, and a substantial portion of the remaining American personnel. Major General Smith asked Colonel Mickler, now the Supervisor of Airlift, for an evaluation of the airfield. At 0745, after checking with the Combat Control Team and Tiger Ops, the Supervisor of Airlift reported that the airfield was not usable due to ordnance on the runways and lack of security caused by the probability of rioting South Vietnamese Army and Air Force troops now streaming onto the runways, ramps, and taxiways. However, the word was given that the fixed-wing evacuation would again be attempted to further draw down remaining Americans and key Vietnamese, so the Combat Control Team took up new positions and began to prepare to load passengers from both the Evacuation Processing Center and from the city.

To insure that Defense Attache Office personnel would be available for the evacuation, the Planning Group was ordered to begin carrying out surface and air evacuation plans, but the plans applied only to the Defense Attache Office people. Art Laehr described the arrival of one of the first convoys at the Defense Attache Office.

The bus convoys started bringing DAO personnel, together with those civilians that had been made ready to be evacuated, to the DAO compound. Each convoy contained about seven buses. When they arrived there was panic to get inside the DAO building as artillery hit TSN and rockets hit sporadically here and there.

The halls of the DAO building were a blessing in disguise. They automatically marshaled the mobs into controllable columns. The two story building provided more than enough halls to prevent overcrowding. Americans showed up with many weapons. One had a Swedish K, two grenades, two pistols, and a knife. Everyone seemed to give up their weapons without struggle once inside the building.

Meanwhile, Major General Smith told the Ambassador that Tan Son Nhut was no longer usable for fixed-wing aircraft. Ambassador Martin chose to personally check the situation and was briefed by General Smith and the Defense Attache Office staff. He then drove to the flight line for a firsthand look—a very dangerous act. He saw the gravity of the situation, but because of his strong desire to move a significant number of Vietnamese that day (mission employees, high risk government officials and South Vietnamese Air Force families), he stuck with the fixed-wing plan. General Smith, in the meantime, conferred with CINCPAC who agreed that safe and productive fixed-wing evacuation was out. Admiral Gayler in turn recommended to the Joint Chiefs of Staff that Option IV of Operation FREQUENT WIND should commence. Ambassador Martin was advised of the call, and was assured once more that Tan Son Nhut was unusable.

Several important associated incidents occurred while that decision was being made. When the movement of all Defense Attache Office employees was ordered by General Smith at 0700, it was interpreted by the Special Planning Group that even the staff at the Evacuation Processing Center was involved. A Marine lieutenant, in charge of a security detail, was sent to the Annex area by jeep at 0730 and he passed the word that all Americans, civilian and military, were to quietly exfiltrate to the Defense Attache Office compound for evacuation.

John Hilgenberg tells of how he reacted to the order:

Only those people on the perimeter got the immediate word and began their move out. I was working in the center of the EPC and did not hear of the order until Sgt Peter Galpin, one of the US Army medics, relayed it to me. There were still about 2800 evacuees in the area who by this time were getting the feeling they were going to be abandoned. They included about 12 Americans with their VN dependents, numbering over 10 in each case. I could not leave. I asked Sgt Galpin to stay to attend to several sick and the two wounded in the gym and then was told by the supervisor of the remaining six DAO civilians from the gym that they would also stay. Our previous thin security force of Security Police, a few Marines and civilians was reduced to eight, and we had our work cut out for us now.

Meanwhile, at 0800, Lieutenant General Minh, Commander of the South Vietnamese Air Force, and 30 of his staff entered the Defense Attache office compound and demanded evacuation by American aircraft. Art Laehr was in the Evacuation Control Center when news of the demand arrived:

The message was given to Major General Smith in the



Figure 26. LT COL DICK MITCHELL, USAF, "Just Me?"

Readiness Room of the DAO, that the senior VNAF officers demanded evacuation and they were all heavily armed. I watched Lieutenant Colonel Mitchell's face as Major General Smith told him to go outside and disarm them. (Mitchell was the Assistant Air Attache and coordinator of VNAF family evacuations). General Smith told Lieutenant Colonel Mitchell to tell them that he would have them shot if they refused to give up their arms. Mitchell said—"just me?" (See figure 21.) Lieutenant Colonel Mitchell then proceeded with the task. The VNAF officers offered no resistance. We put them in the intelligence briefing room so as not to excite the others in the building. When the crowd diminished they were evacuated.

The arrival of the South Vietnamese Air Force staff at the Defense Attache Office signalled the complete loss of command and control of the South Vietnamese Air Force, already in a volatile situation. This loss was demonstrated between 0930-1000, when a group of 40 to 50 South Vietnamese including South Vietnamese Air Force officers and other officials entered Tiger Ops, where Supervisor of Airlift personnel were still reporting airfield status, and demanded evacuation. Colonel Earl Mickler described the confrontation at the flight line, particularly the performance of Major Dale Hensley.

On the last day, Dale held things together down at Flying Tiger Ops and probably through his coolness, saved lives. There were two VNAF pilots who were known to Major Delligatti from earlier years, who visited us once or twice during the final week, long enough to know we were controlling the airlift birds. On the last day, just as we were trying to get the guys off the flight line and to the DAO compound, these two and others showed up, pulled guns and took Dale, Skip Orrell, and Frank Shapira hostage. Dale kept his head and convinced one VNAF officer that our guys would be back when things settled down and would get him a seat on an airplane out of town. Dale talked him out of the gun and made it possible for everyone to get out. It was a situation where any wrong move would have gotten someone killed. But Dale coolly set it all up—they left everything they had with them, but got out with their skins.

Six armed Marines were then sent to Tiger Ops and all remaining US personnel were extracted from the flight line area. All reporting ceased with their departure.

At about 1100, Colonel Gavin McCurdy was informed that Mr. Lan, the Director of Civil Aviation and six of his employees were still trapped in Tiger Ops. Mr. Lan had been the key Vietnamese official who succeeded in keeping the airdrome open as long as it was. Colonel McCurdy told Mr. Lan to walk quietly with his personnel to

the Defense Attache Office compound and Captain Rufus Coburn, of the Supervisor of Airlift staff, was sent to the gate to identify them to the Defense Attache Office officials and escort them into the building. At this point all South Vietnamese civilian and military control of the airdrome area ceased.

As noted earlier, both air and surface extraction of metropolitan Saigon commenced at 0810 for Defense Attache Office employees. At 1000 the partial extraction was expanded to include all US Mission employees. One flaw in the order to evacuate all Defense Attache Office employees was already described, the exfiltration from the Evacuation Processing Center. A second flaw, more significant to air extraction, also occurred: the decision to bring in the rooftop Helicopter Landing Site controllers who happened to be Defense Attache Office employees. This initially stripped the Landing Sites of a major share of their control personnel. Many individuals were eventually returned to their Landing Sites to complete that part of the work.

The execution of the air evacuation was a story in itself. The Air America control element intended to operate from their own operations center, but about 0930, were forced to leave by incoming rocket fire and eventual takeover by armed South Vietnamese Air Force pilots who later hijacked four of the evacuation helicopters. Equally serious was the loss of the refueling capability on the Air America ramp. A total of 20 helicopters were put in use for the extraction, though several suffered subsequent battle damage and were left behind. Later, when the Marine Ground Security Force arrived, the decision to abandon the Air America ramp was reaffirmed and that refueling capability was completely lost. A refueling truck in the Defense Attache Office compound could have relieved the refueling problems, but it would not start. A major change in operations became necessary as the Air America helicopters, originally planned for the intra-Saigon-Defense Attache Office shuttle, now had to begin flying periodically to the ships in the task force for refueling.

Despite the problems, Air America crews continued to fly their missions throughout the day (figure 22). All previously designated Helicopter Landing Sites were used—even those without controllers. Pilots had been instructed to check out all the sites and if they saw Americans, to pick them up. They did just that. They even plucked off five Americans trapped on top of the Grey House, a US billet not even designated as a site.

The Air America aircraft delivered their evacuees either to the Defense Attache Office compound, the Embassy, or the ships at sea (when they needed fuel). Those delivered to the Embassy created a special problem to be described later. When the aircraft started to drop off evacuees at the Helicopter Landing Zone in the Annex,



Figure 27. Evacuees Waiting to Board a Helicopter Atop a Saigon Building.

Lieutenant Colonel Hilgenberg got his first notice that the helicopter extraction was in progress. Several aircraft took off in a pattern that carried them over the South Vietnamese Army paratrooper billets adjacent to the Evacuation Processing Center and drew a number of rounds of M-16 fire, apparently from the frustrated soldiers. Hilgenberg reported this to the Evacuation Control Center and subsequent patterns were adjusted to avoid that area (figure 9).

The surface extraction plan, with its prepositioned buses and trained drivers and escorts, was described earlier. By 27 April, the original routes had been reduced from ten to four and the total number of buses drawn down from 42 to 30. Several of the buses in the reduction were stationed at the Embassy and little used, if at all. Others were commandeered by Embassy personnel, and control of these vehicles was lost. That did not cause any personnel to be left behind, but did force the smaller convoys to operate in the city for a longer period than originally envisioned.

At any rate, at first light on 29 April, 23 buses with US citizen drivers and convoy escorts were at their stations and ready to begin operations. This one advance step saved several hours which would have been required for positioning and probably saved a large number of evacuees. Nine convoys carried over 2,500 evacuees from metropolitan Saigon to the Defense Attache Office compound between 0815 and 1745. The extraction had its problems throughout the day. According to a member of the Special Planning Group escort force:

One convoy was broken up by dissident ARVN (Army of Vietnam) elements and its vehicles abandoned. The evacuees were subsequently picked up by another convoy diverted from its normal route . . .

Difficulties continued, but most convoys were able to stick to their assigned routes. South Vietnamese armed forces military check points were the main problem. Original planned loads of 40 passengers per bus were increased to 60-70 and no luggage was allowed. Two large American billets downtown were designated multiple-convoy forming points from which armed military (Marine) escorts assisted in the trips to the Defense Attache Office. In the words of another Planning Group member:

The decision was precipitated by rapidly increasing ARVN and National Police harassment of the buses, action which . . . had resulted in mechanical disabling of two buses by small arms fire, scattered damage to three more, wounding of one driver in the left arm, and a second citizen driver undergoing a heart attack (not fatal) as a result of his efforts.

The original plan called for Vietnamese drivers to drive the buses, but based on the performance of Vietnamese in the face of confrontation at Da Nang and other sites, a backup crew of American-citizen drivers was recruited and did the driving.

While the surface and air evacuations from metropolitan Saigon continued through the morning, the decision-making process between the Defense Attache Office and the Embassy was underway. Ambassador Martin, after checking the airfield himself, agreed with Major General Smith at about 1000 that Option IV of Operation FREQUENT WIND should be executed. At 1048, Ambassador Martin called the Washington Planning Group and CINCPAC requesting Option IV. At 1051 an execution order from Admiral Gayler (CINCPAC) was passed to all units. Unfortunately, this did not get things under way immediately. For some yet unexplained reason, there was confusion over the L- (launch) hour for the evacuation. Lieutenant Colonel Laehr gave the following version of the confusion from his vantage point in the Evacuation Control Center where all communications equipment was still operating* at 1100:

Option IV of Operation FREQUENT WIND was underway, but got off to a bad start when the L-hour (launch hour as defined by the USSAG-7th Air Force plan) was delayed twice. The first change reportedly took place at sea and involved the movement of Marines from support ships to the aircraft carriers.

*Subsequently, the cablehead at Vung Tau was cut at 1145 and only the satellite terminal and High Frequency radio provided communications to the outside world.

From there, the helicopters carrying the Ground Security Force would be launched. This delay is understandable because of the lateness of the decision to finally request the helicopter evacuation after TSN was closed to fixed-wing evacuation. Such a large force just could not be marshalled instantly.

The first flights of helicopters led by the command helicopter bringing in Brigadier General Carey, USMC, Commander of the Ground Security Force, were apparently due to land at about 1400 hours, one of the changed L-hour times. I say this for several reasons. First, General Carey did land at 1406, reporting some ground fire on his ingress to the DAO Compound. As General Carey entered the ECC, it was apparent that he was upset from learning that some kind of delay message had been passed to the troop carrier helicopters. The message had come from a source yet undetermined.

The second reason for believing the L-hour was confused was the fact that the ECC received several calls from USSAG and CINCPAC, including Admiral Gayler, asking if the helicopters had arrived yet. In fact one call demanded that an ECC representative go outside the building to the HLZ to visually determine if any more helicopters had landed or were in the area. A visual scan of the skies over Saigon determined that none was in sight.

At the time of writing, the authors have been unable to determine precisely why the L-hour confusion existed or who issued the order delaying the troop carrier helicopters (CH-46s and CH-53s). Confusion over the L-hour terminology was explained in an article by Brigadier General Carey in the March 1976 *Marine Corps Gazette*:

Second among major planning considerations was the clarification of L-Hour. To Marines, it meant the time that a helicopter would touch down in a landing zone. To the Air Force, it meant that time that a helicopter would launch, a definition used during the evacuation from Cambodia on 12 April. Once clarification was sought, L-Hour was defined for all forces as the time that the first helicopter would touch down in a landing zone.

While this L-hour clarification may have been true in higher circles of coordination, it was not known in the Evacuation Control Center. The 7th AF battle staff members working at Nakhon Phanom during the final helicopter extractions, were unaware of any departure from the USAF definition of L-hour as "launch time" as written in the US Support Activities Group-7th AF plan. Fortunately for most concerned, as subsequent events proved, the L-hour mix-up did not substantially alter the evacuation effort—but if greater

resistance had been shown by enemy forces, the confusion could have had serious effects. As it turned out it did not.

While the helicopters were delayed on the ships and en route to Saigon, supporting aircraft were launched and over Tan Son Nhut shortly after 1200. John Hilgenberg, still working at the Evacuation Processing Center, gives this description:

About 1230, I saw the first American fighters overhead. The initial flights looked to be about 10,000 feet and took a lot of ground fire as I could observe many airbursts, mostly behind the aircraft. I assumed it was ARVN gunners firing at unknowns, thinking back to the previous night. No more VNAF aircraft were flying.

A wide variety of aircraft (USAF, USN, and USMC) participated in the evacuation. A USAF C-130, Airborne Command and Control Center was overhead during the entire evacuation and controlled all air operations over the land area. (Naval control ships controlled air operations of USN, USMC, and USAF aircraft operating off the ships while they were still over water.)

USAF and USN fighters and fighter-bombers covered the evacuation during daylight hours and were replaced by AC-130 gunships from Thailand at night. Strategic Air Command KC-135 tankers and radio-relay aircraft were constantly overhead. USAF and USN electronic countermeasures, reconnaissance, and rescue aircraft were either in the area or immediately on call. With the aerial firepower overhead and helicopters on the way, a series of separate activities were taking place on the ground and waterways of Vietnam.

The bus convoys, which experienced minor difficulties earlier, were now running into more serious problems. The scene at the Embassy was chaotic. Despite earlier discussion between the Planning Group and Embassy Security Officers on potential problems around the area there was no coordinated scheme to prevent such congestion and to control the crowd. The last convoy departed the Embassy at 1530 amidst disorder which threatened its safety. At 1500, and again an hour later, convoys in the downtown area were rushed by mobs of Vietnamese who smashed doors and forced their way on board. It was necessary for Mr. P. Baker, the convoy escort, and Marine security guards to use shots fired into the air as well as using buses as "slow moving bulldozers in order to regain control and eventually extract the convoys." The last convoy, carrying almost 800 people, entered Tan Son Nhut Gate 1 at 1745 after five attempts to get through. It had to continue moving on the traffic triangle near the gate to prevent being overrun. The convoy was under continual

harassment and sporadic small arms fire. Captain Tony Wood, USMC, member of the Special Planning Group, finally convinced the guards to allow the convoy to pass when he threatened to request overhead attack aircraft to direct suppressive fire against the check point. As Authur Laehr describes it:

At Gate 1 to Tan Son Nhut AB, Vietnamese guards fired in the air and in the direction of the evacuation buses, shouting, "We want to go too." When Capt Tony Wood (USMC) brought the last bus convoy to the Tan Son Nhut gate, ARVN elements prevented passage. Capt Wood called the FCC for instructions. General Carey (USMC, Ground Support Force Commander) instructed Capt Wood to have the buses fall back and stand by. He then called for aircover above the gate. When overhead, General Carey told Capt Wood to tell the ARVN to look up. They were told that if passage was not permitted the entire area would be destroyed. This solved the situation.

In a simultaneous action, Major General Smith contacted Lieutenant Colonel Nguu, Deputy Base Commander and Security Chief of Tan Son Nhut, informing him in no uncertain terms that the bus was not allowed through Gate 1, his chances of leaving Vietnam were nil. After a quick series of phone calls, Nguu convinced someone to allow the convoy to pass. It is difficult to say whether one threat or the other, or both, convinced the Vietnamese to open the gate. The arrival of the buses at the Defense Attache Office compound was proof of success and was the end of the surface evacuation.

Meanwhile, the air evacuation was still going on. At about 1700, Air America closed down its command post in the Defense Attache Office area and from then on controlled its efforts from command and control aircraft. The air evacuation was terminated as darkness fell at about 1830 and all operations ceased about 1930 when the last aircraft recovered on the ships at sea. Despite the fact that air evacuation was executed simultaneously with surface evacuation (and not after it as originally conceived), it was successfully and safely performed. Over 1,000 evacuees were repositioned or moved to ships in nearly 12 hours of continuous operations. It is doubtful that most of these would have made it had not this portion of the plan been flown so expertly. Cool heads and flying skill pulled it off.

Sea evacuation down the Saigon River was a potential option on the morning of 29 April with three tugs, four barges, and an LST still tied up at the Newport docks. The area was relatively calm in the morning. About noon, a bus convoy from the Embassy, under

security of South Vietnamese forces, tried to reach the docks, but was forced back by suddenly hostile crowds blocking the roads. Captain Carmody, USN, Chief of the American Legation, authorized the loading of the LST with any available Americans and legitimate Vietnamese in the area. The LST sailed at 1500 under the protective umbrella of American airpower. At this time, large crowds were forming outside the Newport gate and security was becoming tenuous. Carmody ordered the three tugs and four barges to sail, but to stop at the Khanh Hoi docks (downtown Saigon) to check if any American controlled buses with evacuees were in the area. One tug and barge tried to tie up at the docks at 1530, but were driven off when large, unruly crowds of Vietnamese threatened to overwhelm them. A second tug, arriving 30 minutes later found the docks almost empty. The crew called for evacuees and eventually boarded a large group in orderly fashion and departed at 1715. All remaining watercraft made a safe trip down to the sea with only minor small arms fire from one section in the city.

Commander Dick Ward of the Defense Attache Office Navy Division described the final operations off the coast:

Although initially it was the policy that all South Vietnamese evacuees would be embarked in or transferred to Military Sealift Command or its contract ships, the large number of refugees arriving in small boats caused a reversal in that policy. All ships, including the Seventh Fleet units, finally embarked refugees and remained in the holding area off Vung Tau until all those who desired evacuation were on board.

Another group of about 100 evacuees included a number of Americans evacuated by sea. These were the members of the Consul General staff from Can Tho in Military Region 4 (The Delta) of South Vietnam. The aerial recovery from Saigon had consumed virtually all assets from the task force, and none were left to extract the people in Can Tho. However, this contingency had been envisioned in the US Mission's Emergency and Evacuation Plan. If airlift were available, the Consul General's staff would either fly into Saigon for evacuation or could recover directly to a safe haven, probably Thailand which was closest. As it turned out, neither of these options was available, so a third was used—evacuation by sea. Led by Mr. Terry McNamara, the Military Region 4 Consul General Americans, Third Country Nationals, and US-employed Vietnamese boarded two small boats the morning of 29 April and started down the Mekong River. During the day, the boats came under fire from armed South Vietnamese Air Force helicopters. Several flights of A-7s were dispatched to the area to provide convoy escort. After darkness fell, the two boats had to grope their way while coming under periodic enemy small arms fire from the banks and islands.

The Military Region 4 evacuees were eventually picked up by US ships at the mouth of the river and became another part of the overall evacuation group.

Back in Saigon at the Evacuation Processing Center in the Defense Attache Office Annex, yet another series of dramas were unfolding. Hilgenberg describes the tension:

I was nervously expecting some new information on the evacuation of the EPC where 2800 evacuees had been waiting for anywhere from 24 to 48 hours. To describe the evacuees as "spooky" (words of 1st Lt Coleman) was somewhat of an understatement. At about 0900 I requested help from the ECC, i.e., send back the SPs and Marines who left an hour earlier. (The request was temporarily sidetracked by fast breaking events in and around the DAO compound, described earlier.) At about 1000, Sgt Galpin reported that the ARVN paratroopers, billeted adjacent to the EPC, were cutting a hole in the cyclone security fence behind the bowling alley. In addition, the crowd, while not unruly, was taking on a desperate nature. I could not move anywhere in the area without 8 or 10 people grabbing me, asking about the situation, pleading to be first out, and begging that we don't leave them for 'surely they would die when the VC took over.' I called for help about every 30 minutes, but none was forthcoming—yet. I was told later that the Security Police from the EPC had been assigned defense positions around the DAO compound. This seemed strange to me since I was virtually trapped about one-half mile away with about 15 other Americans and all the remaining refugees. I thought to myself that I was either dispensable or that I would need a Marine escort to get out. I doubted the evacuees would allow the other Americans and me walk out peacefully.

By about noon, I was in the process of covertly moving the remaining Americans and their VN dependents from the Annex to the DAO Compound. I had to form them quietly in the gym, then out the back door which was screened from the other evacuees. We also moved the wounded personnel to the DAO Compound HLZ. During this time, I saw displayed a rare demonstration of courage. About 30 Koreans (contractors with families), were in one of the groups ready for departure. We had been giving preference to TCNs and Americans and all these were now removed from the EPC. The Korean leader asked me point blank if I thought the remaining evacuees could get out. I truthfully told him I did not know. He then asked if we could provide weapons and ammunition for his group since they were determined not to be captured. I reassured him that we were still trying to get everyone out and deferred his request.

(It crossed my mind at the time that this group might be a possible important ally should we have to make a stand. I kept track of their position until later events negated any such action.)

By about 1300, I was ordered to move small groups of about 70 people from the EPC to Building 5000. Option IV of FREQUENT WIND was under way by this time though we learned later that L-hour for the helicopters was delayed several times by misinterpretation of times and cross-decking* operations to pick up Marines, etc. The plan was to send out mixed groups of Americans and VNs to avoid creating a panic situation. Colonel Phil Brewster, Chief of the DAO Air Force Division, and Lieutenant Colonel Marty Mahrt, AF Div Ops, were manning the Compound HLZ as Marshalling Area Control Officers. The first EPC group of evacuees was sent up to Building 5000 in buses driven by VN drivers, bribed to insure loyalty with C-rations and cokes. Within 10 minutes the buses returned fully loaded. The crowd reaction when the group left turned positive and hopeful; when the group returned the reaction was the opposite and the crowd began to press forward. I called the ECC to check why the buses returned and was told they had gathered too many people at the Compound already. Then I unilaterally turned the buses around and sent the group back to DAO. I believe the action prevented a riot since I never could have explained the turnabout to that group.

At about 1400 my calls for reinforcements were answered as First Lieutenant Dick Coleman and nine Clark SPs returned to the Annex. I had the men positioned at key points in the EPC to steady the crowd, then sent Coleman and three others to check the bowling alley where ARVN paratroopers were reportedly inside the building, harassing the evacuees and looting baggage. The report was true, so I went inside with Coleman and Master Sergeant Taylor, in charge of the SP group. About 12 or 15 soldiers, armed with M-16s, were going through the remaining bags left behind by frightened evacuees. We had two carbines and a .45 handgun between us, but when we hollered for them to 'get the hell out,' they picked up whatever was closest to them and retreated through the back door and out the hole cut in the fence. We then stationed two Security Police, under protection but in view of the hole, to prevent the soldiers' return. I didn't really appreciate the potential seriousness of that encounter until many hours later. Nevertheless the bluff had worked. Maybe it was the sight of Americans in uniform which forced the retreat.

*Cross-decking is the act of moving Marines from the ships where they are billeted to those from which they are launched.

At about 1430, Col Max Lamont, USAF, DAO Executive Officer, and Mr. Charles Enberger of the Air Force Division delivered a pickup truck full of C-rations which I had requested to feed the people who had not eaten in over 24 hours. For that matter, neither had I. At any rate, the presence of food which most could share had a definite stabilizing effect on the crowd.

As noted earlier, Brigadier General Richard E. Carey, USMC, Commander of the 3rd Marine Amphibious Brigade, arrived in a UH-1 helicopter at 1406 expecting to be followed by CH-53s with the Ground Security Force. To his surprise, the troop carrier aircraft had turned around and the first ones did not touch down at the Defense Attache Office area until 1506.

Again, John Hilgenberg describes the reaction of the EPC:

At 1512, three Marine CH-53s roared overhead at about 50 feet. They had landed moments before at Building 5000, deposited the first of an 840-man Ground Security Force (Figure 23) loaded up with evacuees and headed back for the ships. To me the sight was almost too good to be true for I had not seen them land. The crowd broke into a huge cheer with hand clapping and the first smiles I had seen in days. However, as the aircraft passed over the ARVN dependent housing area just SW of the EPC, they received more than 100 rounds of M-16 and M-79 grenade fire. I could not determine if any were hit, but I immediately reported the ground fire to the ECC and recommended that the aircraft go out higher and by some other route. I can only assume there were large numbers of dissident soldiers in the area who had a view of the EPC operation, but had no chance to get out themselves.



Figure 28. USMC Ground Security Force Disembarks at Saigon.

Shortly thereafter I received the word from the ECC to move 65-person groups of evacuees to the PX HLZ and have them ready for departure as the helicopters arrived. Here is where the Air Force security policemen really performed brilliantly. As each group was formed, a single Security Policeman would guide them to the HLZ about 100 meters away from the EPC. Within 30 minutes, the HLZ was ringed with 65-person groups and Lt Col Mitchell, USAF, assumed duties of HLZ director, supervising the overall operation. Sporadic sniping was taking place and one small girl was wounded in the shoulder. Lieutenant Coleman, who was not assisting in the HLZ control function, described how snipers from the ARVN paratrooper cantonment area were firing at upper windows in the buildings where some evacuee groups, ferried earlier by Air America helicopters, were huddled for protection. Glass from the windows fell among the people and in Coleman's words, 'spooked them more than ever.' When a sniper appeared on a water tower catwalk in view of the HLZ and began to fire, Coleman directed several of his SPs to fire on the tower when the man appeared. This procedure kept the sniper on the far side and reduced the sniping. When an ARVN major pulled a weapon on one the SPs, demanding his own evacuation, Lieutenant Coleman disarmed the man using his own sidearm. The situation was conducive to panic, but it did not occur, primarily through the efforts of Lieutenant Colonel Mitchell, Lieutenant Coleman, and the Clark SPs.

About 1600, the first wave of three CH-53s landed in the PX HLZ. The SPs assisted rapid loading of three 65-evacuee groups through the rear cargo doors of each aircraft, and they were airborne within two to three minutes. Simultaneously, waves of three helicopters were landing at the DAO Compound and ballpark HLZs to deposit GSF personnel, then load up with evacuees and depart. It was at these HLZs that Colonel Brewster and Lt Col Mahrt, among others, were directing the loading operations.

The helicopters were not coming in unopposed. Lieutenant Colonel Cliff Tatum, USAF, an exchange officer flying A-7s off the *USS Enterprise* relates his experiences in flying cover for the helicopters.

After about 36 hours of alert and prelaunch activities, word was passed that *Enterprise* A-7, A-6, F-14, and other aircraft would participate in evacuation efforts associated with the pullout of the American and some friendly forces in the Saigon/Vung Tau area.

