

USS HANCOCK CVA-19 - EAGLE PULL AND FREQUENT WIND

The Evacuation of Phnom Penh and Saigon By CDR Nick Carbone, USN, (Ret.) As told to Mandy Smith

On March 18, 1975, the U.S.S. HANCOCK CVA-19, with Carrier Air Wing 21 (CVW-21) embarked, departed Alameda, CA, for a routine deployment to the Western Pacific. I was the Air Wing Intelligence Officer. The air wing staff and attack aircraft were based at Naval Air Station (NAS) Lemoore, CA, and included: A-4 attack aircraft, F-8 fighters, E-1 radar planes and a number of helicopters. The HANCOCK was scheduled to stop off Hawaii to conduct an Operational Readiness Evaluation (ORE) to ensure the ship and air wing were ready for deployment. We were not scheduled to participate in any Vietnam actions. However, en route to Hawaii, about one day into the deployment, the HANCOCK was informed that Saigon was likely to fall, and that additional helicopter support would be needed for the evacuation, designated Operation Frequent Wind. We were directed to stop in Hawaii and load aboard Marine helicopters that were based in Hawaii. We arrived March 23. The Marines brought CH-53 and CH-46 troop transport helicopters, and a couple of AH-1 Huey Cobras. We had to take on the Marine helicopters, and keep the air wing for the trip to the Philippines. In order to make room for the helicopters, all of the air wing aircraft were packed on the back half of the carrier flight deck and in the hanger bay. The helicopters took up the forward half of the flight deck. In Hawaii the Marine helicopters were flown across the island to Pearl Harbor, towed to the carrier pier, and loaded aboard using cranes because the flight deck was too full for them to fly aboard. Fortunately, Marine helicopters have folding rotor blades, so they didn't take up as much room. The USS MIDWAY participated in the evacuation with USAF CH-53 helicopters, which do not have folding rotor blades, limiting the number that could be brought aboard. We left Hawaii March 26 with the full air wing and the Marine helicopters with just enough space on the forward flight deck to launch one or two helicopters, if necessary. We could not launch any aircraft. The crowded flight deck reminded me of the WWII Billy Mitchell bomber raid on Japan from a carrier.

After we had everything loaded we left at best speed for the Philippines. The HANCOCK was an old ship with old engines and propeller shafts in need of repair. One of the four shafts was not operational, and had to be locked in place. The ship had been scheduled for decommissioning several times before, but operational requirements kept that from happening. I made two of HANCOCK's "last cruises". As we approached the Philippines we flew the air wing off to be temporarily based at NAS Cubi Point, making room for helicopter operations. Enough helicopters were launched to clear one catapult. The helicopters hovered around the ship while aircraft were pulled from the pack one at a time, started and launched. The second catapult was blocked with helicopters, and the aircraft pack was too tight to start aircraft in the pack. Once our aircraft were flown off, the helicopters returned to the ship and the flight deck was reorganized. The air wing aircraft, aircrews and several squadron intelligence officers stayed in the Philippines during the evacuations of Cambodia and Saigon. After the evacuations the Marines were offloaded in the Philippines and rode back to Hawaii on another carrier. The air wing was loaded back aboard and we continued with our deployment.

We arrived at Subic Bay in the Philippines on April 6. The initial estimate was that Saigon would not fall until May, so the decision was made to begin repairs to the locked shaft and scheduled engineering work. Philippine shipyard workers would do the repairs. Shortly after

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repairs began, we received word that the Lon Nol regime in Cambodia was about to be overthrown by Pol Pot, leader of the Khmer Rouge forces, and that the HANCOCK and Marine helicopters were needed in the evacuation of U.S. Embassy personnel in Phnom Penh, designated Operation Eagle Pull. Essential engineering equipment was put back together, and the ship departed Subic Bay on April 9, with the shipyard workers still aboard to continue repairs. We arrived off Cambodia the night before the evacuation, which was conducted on April 12. The USS MIDWAY, with USAF CH-53 helicopters, also participated in the evacuation. HANCOCK helicopters flew into Phnom Penh with a detachment of Marines and set up a perimeter around a soccer field used for the evacuation. Fortunately, with the large number of helicopters, 287 U.S. and foreign nationals were evacuated quickly. As the security detachment was being evacuated, mortar rounds began landing in the soccer field.

After Eagle Pull, with the timing for Frequent Wind still projected for May and much of the evacuation of Embassy personnel scheduled for fixed wing aircraft out of Tan Son Nhut airport, the HANCOCK was sent to Singapore for a five-day port call. We arrived April 16, and many of the crew went ashore to order tailored made clothing. The next day, there was an emergency recall, and, on April 18, the ship departed Singapore for Saigon. We probably left behind a lot of disappointed tailors.

The Air Wing and Marine intelligence personnel began briefing the helicopter aircrew en route to Saigon. When Tan Son Nhut began receiving artillery and rocket fire, the decision was made to cancel the fixed wing evacuation and conduct the entire lift by helicopter. Two landing areas were used, Tan Son Nhut, which was still available for helo operations, and the American Embassy compound. Like Eagle Pull, the first helicopters would bring in Marine security forces from HANCOCK and bring out evacuees. Both MIDWAY and HANCOCK helicopters would deliver the evacuees to transport and auxiliary ships brought in for the operation. The mission called for evacuating, as I recall, about 1,500 foreign nationals and the Ambassador and staff. No evacuees were scheduled for HANCOCK or MIDWAY. The operation was to begin early morning and only take several hours. The biggest concern for the aircrews was shoulder-fired heat seeking surface-to-air missiles. Therefore, the aircrews carried flare guns to divert the heat-seeking missiles. Additionally, during the transit the helicopters were painted with a low infrared reflective paint to reduce the heat signature. Several missiles were reported launched at the helicopters during the evacuation, but no helicopters were lost to enemy fire. One HANCOCK CH-46 helicopter flew into the water very late into the operation, probably due to pilot fatigue. The crew was lost, and there were no passengers.

The aircrew briefings began at 6:00 or 7:00 AM, April 29, with the departure of the security forces scheduled to begin at 9:00 AM. However, the decision to begin the evacuation did not come until after 11:00 AM. While the evacuation force waited, Vietnamese helicopters, and at least one small fixed wing aircraft, began flying out to the ships in the task force. The helicopters had been overloaded with Vietnamese military personnel and their families. The HANCOCK took aboard about 23 UH-1 and two CH-47 helicopters. We also had five or six Air America UH-1 helicopters come aboard. Those pilots were American. Most of this occurred before the evacuation started, with the Marine helicopters parked on the starboard side of the flight deck. It was obvious that the Vietnamese had not landed on a moving ship before, and there was



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great concern that they might crash into the evacuation helicopters. Normally, when a helicopter lands, there is a controller on the flight deck who stands in front of the intended landing spot directing the helicopter where to set down and monitoring obstacles and clearances. Initially, there was no radio contact with the Vietnamese and a language barrier, which made the landing operations dangerous. Frequently, the pilot did not understand that he was being signaled to set down, and the controller was backing up because the helicopter was getting close. The helicopter would follow the controller instead of setting down. After a few helicopters landed, several pilots were taken to the tower to communicate with the incoming pilots and provide landing instructions. We later found out that the light plane landed on the MIDWAY, and that several helicopters attempted to land on the smaller combatants and auxiliaries. Since there was no room to keep the helicopters, the pilot would drop off the passengers and then set the helicopter in the water near the ship and swim to the ship.



As the Vietnamese UH-1s, which had folding rotor blades, came aboard they were taken below to the hanger deck. The two CH-47s had to remain on the flight deck. However, the evacuees were also taken to the hanger deck, and as their numbers grew it became apparent that there would not be room to keep the helicopters. Since the Marines also have UH-1s, they stripped the usable equipment and pushed the helicopters over the side. The CH-47s were also pushed off to make room for the evacuation helicopters. One of the CH-47s got hung up in the safety net and looked like a giant grasshopper hanging on to the back of the flight deck.



Since the evacuation began late morning, by early afternoon the aircrew had already been up since 5 AM. There were only a few extra aircrew, so they would have to fly until the evacuation was complete. The flight route was direct from HANCOCK to Saigon through the Rung Sat Special Zone. This minimized the opportunity for contact with the VC/NVA. I believe that we were initially landing at both Tan Son Nhut and the Embassy, but focused on the Embassy as the shelling of Tan Son Nhut increased. Radio communications between the command ship and the Embassy were sporadic at first, so an AH-1 Cobra was stationed over the Embassy to act as a radio relay. The helicopters could not land in the compound, so they hovered on the Embassy roof. Americans and Vietnamese staff made their way through the Embassy roof. Those personnel were evacuated relatively quickly, but there were many more Vietnamese who had worked with the U.S. who climbed the compound walls and joined the evacuees. The evacuation would have ended earlier, but the Ambassador refused to leave until all those loyal to the U.S were evacuated. As night wore on, the Vietnamese kept coming over the walls and the Ambassador refused to leave. As the number of evacuees grew, the auxiliary and transport ships filled up and they began taking them to the HANCOCK. By the end of the evacuation, there were about 2,000 evacuees in HANCOCK's hanger bay.

HANCOCK's helicopters continued to fly until 7:30 AM the next morning, with the pilots far exceeding normal flight safety regulations. Several commented that, because of the vibration they began to lose feeling in their feet, legs and buttocks. Since much of helicopter take-off and

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landing is by "feel", it was dangerous. They had to shut down some helicopters and swap crews to provide some rest. The one CH-46 that was lost flew into the water while returning to the ship to refuel, probably as a result of fatigue.

With dawn approaching, the Embassy about to be overrun and the evacuation running out of aircrews, the President of the United States radioed the Ambassador and ordered him to leave. With Vietnamese still coming over the walls, the security forces, with the Ambassador, had to force their way to the roof for the final flights. The command ship had established a code word to indicate when the Ambassador was airborne. When he was finally aboard and the helicopter en route, the pilot reported the codeword and then stated "the Ambassador is aboard". It had been a long day for the Marines.

With the evacuees who arrived by Vietnamese helicopters and those delivered by HANCOCK's helicopters, the ship took aboard about 2,000 evacuees, half the ship's



complement. The evacuees were berthed in the hanger bay. When they first came aboard, the medical department sprayed everyone with a powder to stop ticks, lice and other contamination. They were then registered. Since the ship had not expected to receive evacuees, there was not sufficient rice and other food the Vietnamese would be familiar with. Instead they were fed hot dogs, the only food we had in really large quantities. One of the Marines who had a tuba, which he played at San Diego Padre games, walked through the hanger bay playing for the evacuees.

Following the evacuation, HANCOCK headed for Subic Bay, Philippines, arriving May 3. The evacuees were temporarily housed at Grande Island, a USN rest and recreation facility in Subic Bay. From there, they were flown to Guam for processing transfer to various free world countries.

The following are pictures of HANCOCK's participation in Frequent Wind. In spite of the chaos and crowded conditions, the majority seemed relieved and happy to be onboard, while others appeared reflective about what the future might hold.

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Vietnamese Helicopters Landing Aboard HANCOCK



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Clearing The Flight Deck



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Launch The Evacuation



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The Evacuees Settle Aboard



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