

VIETNAM REPORT

Saigon Evacuation

Capt. Marius Burke Jr.

The hasty and disorganized evacuation of Danang, if it served no other purpose, set the stage for what Air America could expect in future evacuations . . . little if any, support from using customers. At the same time they expected us to do everything possible to effect a successful extraction of people at the latest possible moment. The security and well-being of Air America employees seems to have been strictly an in-house problem. This situation was further brought out during the Nha Trang evacuation, which, although it represented less problems, still left us holding the bag.

Because of, or perhaps despite my experiences in the Danang evacuation, I was asked to go to Nha Trang to handle flight operations for Air America. Upon arrival around 9AM, it became obvious that an evacuation was already underway and plans to go downtown for meetings/briefings would have been useless. The Counsel General for Nha Trang was already in the process of departing for Saigon in one of our Volpars. I thus found myself, along with another Air America chopper crew, the only control and coordination left at the airport. It was a surprisingly orderly crowd lined up for evacuation, particularly compared to the mass hysteria that seemed to be the norm at Danang. There were approximately 500 people on the ramp awaiting evacuation. This was more than two helicopters could handle given the fact that fuel was a limited commodity and we would not have enough to pull everyone out. About that time a Flying Tiger DC-8 called in for instructions and requested a ramp be made available for loading. We found a ramp and asked how many people they could take out. The response was "500-600". This would have taken care of all the people waiting and since the situation was calm, I instructed them to come on in. About this time, the Nha Trang Consul General, who was now halfway to Saigon and not aware of the situation at the airport, came up on the radio and countermanded my instructions to the DC-8. Despite my protestations and briefing on the situation, he commanded the DC-8 to turn around and return to Saigon. So much from quality leadership from the upper echelons.

Fortunately, the Koreans had sent an LST to Nha Trang to assist in evacuation operations. We made contact with them and were able to shuttle approximately 300 people to the LST in the bay before having to depart due to lack of fuel. Thus, about 200 people were left behind who should have gotten out. I bring this out only to set the scene for what could be expected in the future.

As a sidelight to thought processes at the time . . . in Danang we left with an ambulance from the German hospital parked in our hangar. It had been brought there by the paymaster of the hospital who was a friend of our Filipino mechanics and had the payroll for the hospital inside. Since things were in such turmoil, he was unable to handle the payroll and didn't want to retain possession for fear he would be attacked. It amounted to 81 million piasters which at a rate of approximately 300 to one, amounted to more than \$250,000. During the final evacuation when we came back to our compound at the base to try and find additional Air America employees, my flight mechanic, Gil, told me about the ambulance. I told him I would be happy to drop him off and try to come back for him if he wanted to retrieve the money. He demurred, which was wise. In the mail bag I carried up to Nha Trang, was apparently \$10,000-\$20,000 cash which also ended up being left behind. It was interesting how values seem to change when faced with more important considerations. I don't believe anyone lost any sleep about the money.

I guess partly because of my experiences at Hue, Quang Ngai, Danang and Nha Trang, I was asked to become in evacuation plans at Saigon. A little more support was promised in this particular case, but again, less than was needed. It came very close to becoming a disaster. Again it fell upon Air America to provide its own security, support, etc., with less than minimum personnel and equipment. No need to belabor this point as everyone involved is, or should be, aware of it.

PRELIMINARY COMMENTS:

1. Since it was found that evacuating personnel from insecure areas such as fields and other easy access locations was not a viable option, some method of segregating people who needed to get out had to be found. An aerial recon was

made of downtown Saigon and thirty-two high rise structures were identified as potential helipad landing areas. The plan was to move all appropriate personnel to these locations and make accommodations for helicopters to land on the rooftops. It was felt that by funneling people upwards and securing the lower entrances, we would hopefully buy enough time to rescue people from the buildings before they were overrun from below. A lot of time and effort was spent preparing roof top landing pads. However, although these pads were already obviously compromised, clearance would not be given by the embassy to paint "H's" for easy recognition by the pilots. When the evacuation finally started, it was too late to do so. However, at the six locations that Air America personnel were allowed to stay, we had gone ahead and done so anyway.

2. Consolidation of personnel was a big concern. In order to be effective, it was imperative that we be able to get all our air crews and support personnel together in the minimum amount of time. After much ado, we were given three apartments at 259 Troung Tuoc Dung. This was obviously done for selfish reasons. Apparently, it was felt that with a minimum number of Air America Crews at 259, the rest of the government occupants would be assured transportation out. Strict instructions had been given to Mr. Pickius, the Billeting Officer, not to give any more apartments to Air America! At this time it became obvious that the security of some of the areas where our personnel were living was questionable at best. Most of the Filipinos were eventually talked into moving on base, using company facilities, and accommodations were made for the rest of our people at five other high rise buildings around town. It should be noted that 259 was the best location for us as it was the closest high rise to the airport available. At the time we moved into 259, there were many empty apartments and many of the other apartments housed Vietnamese. During the last few days more apartments were obtained, mainly through back door tactics.

3. In addition to the relative insecurity of many company helipads, marginal communications were a concern. We were able to obtain a small number of FM radios from company sources plus four from the New Zealand Embassy and their air crews. That was four more than we got from the U.S. Embassy! It would be well to note that the New Zealand air crews were allowed to use one of our trailers on the ramp to base out of with their Bristol Freighter. DAO provided a lot of support to us but we were never able to get portable radios from them for our company pads. They never obtained additional hand fuel pumps nor was a UHF radio capability set up for communications in the event our other radios were jammed or inoperative. Surprisingly though, DAO was able to obtain radios and a host of other equipment and facilities for their pads. In addition to providing us with radios, the new Zealanders also had good intelligence information. Two days before the end, they closed down their embassy, made sure they had all personnel attached thereto and departed. They seemed to know just what was going on and had no intention of jeopardizing the security of any New Zealanders or local employees. They left us with additional items of equipment upon their departure. The Filipinos and Chinese employees and their families were in the most precarious position since they were being harassed by their landlords and the police with respect to helicopters landing on their rooftops. On the 28th of April the Chinese reported that the police threatened to shoot down any helicopter that attempted to land at their pad. At this time I directed all the Chinese and Filipinos to move out to the base that night, something we had been trying to get them to do for weeks. This probably saved many of them as very few were left downtown to be picked up the following day.

4. Access to refueling areas was considered a critical item. At the time, we had only DAO and the Air America ramp to rely upon for fuel. As it turned out neither one was satisfactory. With the assistance of OSA people we located an abandoned USAID apartment building, prepared it for landing and then removed all access ladder to the roof. Nikki Pillippi was very helpful in seeing that this was accomplished. The plan was to position drum fuel on this roof for use as an alternate refueling place should we lose our other locations. Six drums of fuel were deposited on the roof that same day. Unfortunately, the local police spotted the activity and apparently when they were unable to get on the roof, stated they would shoot down any helicopter that came near. We could get no support from the embassy on this issue as they had already refused our requests for rooftop landings. We believed that occasional helicopter landings on each of the 32 rooftop pads would get the population used to it and give us more time before they panicked during an actual evacuation. This was the case at 259 where I commuted on a daily basis between there and the airport. The first landing drew a large crowd but after the second or third landing, they paid little attention to our comings and goings. In any case, we lost our backup refueling alternative.

5. On the 26th of April I went to Vung Tau to try and assist the Filipinos who had taken their Vietnamese families there in an effort to get them out on a Filipino LST. As usual, Air America employees had last priority on the military airlift that was taking place out of Ton Son Nhut airport. Thus, it was felt that their only option, particularly, those with Vietnamese families and little or no official documentation, was to get them on the LST that had been sent for that

purpose. Unfortunately, when they arrived at the dock to board shuttle boats to the LST, the Vietnamese military refused to let them depart. As a result there was a total of approximately 1000 women and children camped out on the sand awaiting word of what to do. Naturally, the Filipino employees would not leave their families until they were assured of their safe evacuation. At the same time we needed the services of these employees if we were to accomplish our missions. I was asked to go to Vung Tau and see what could be done to take care of the situation. A meeting was set up with the Filipino Minister of Affairs, Mr. Sabalones, who was in Vung Tau to oversee the evacuation. We discussed several options to the problem, none of which seemed feasible. Finally, I suggested we transport the families out by helicopter, bypassing the Vietnamese at the port docks. Mr. Sabalones' staff was aghast at such a suggestion, but to Sabalones' credit he came right back and said if it were possible to do it. I would have his full support. His staff was doubly concerned that the Vietnamese would balk at anyone departing without "proper" documentation, which few of the Filipino family members possessed. Finally, in what was an apparently deteriorating situation, I convinced Sabalones to allow everyone on the ship regardless of paperwork status. With the use of my helicopter and the assistance of others working for the various customers in the area who allowed them to make shuttles when transiting through, we were able to move over 600 people to the LST. The remaining 400 were moved by barge during the night. Up until this time we had been unable to move any Air America indigenous personnel out of Saigon through normal military airlift evacuation channels. Once the mission of evacuating the Filipino families was completed, many thanks were given for our assistance and I asked if there was anything they could do for us. I asked Mr. Sabalones if he would accept some of our company indigenous personnel since the LST apparently had the capacity to take on at least 300-400 more people. He allowed that they would allow them to be taken aboard if we could get a letter from the U.S. Embassy accepting responsibility for them once they were transported to the Philippines. I felt this would not be a problem. I called Mr. Jacobsen, who was Ambassador Martin's secretary and right hand man, outlining the situation and the offer that had been made. His response was "I wouldn't touch that with a ten foot pole! For all I know you will be putting ARVN soldiers on board." No indigenous employees got out on the ship. Jacobsen was then asked if he would be so kind as to send me a photo of himself. Copies would be made for all flight crews so that when the time came to evacuate we would know who not to pick up. As usual, he did not cooperate.

6. I had a number of meetings with the Ambassador and various staff over the previous weeks and it became quite apparent to me that they really didn't believe an evacuation would ever take place. In fact, the Ambassador, in one conversation told me that he had good information that Saigon was off limits to the North Vietnamese and they would never push that far. Based upon what I had experienced the previous month and the apparent panic on the part of the South Vietnamese I countered with the statement that I felt we had no more than two weeks before it would be over. I was speaking from a gut feel with nothing to substantiate but I didn't realize how accurate my guess was. It turns out that information had apparently been received from the lead Hungarian representative to the International Control Commission (ICCS). And they believed him!

7. About a week before the end I attended a briefing at the embassy. At the end of the meeting I was given a special radio for communication with significant embassy staff members. There were about a dozen names on the list. I remember the ambassador's call sign was "sweetpea". By this time I had taken to commuting from the Air America ramp to our quarters at 259 on a daily basis despite instructions from the embassy not to do so. My reasoning was that it was necessary to establish a routine that the neighbors would get used to and not panic when a final evacuation would begin. Additionally, it was becoming increasingly difficult to get indigenous personnel on to the base. The gate guards would not let them in unless they had significant documentation and paid bribes. We used the helicopter to get around this. Ralph Begian, who was our Flight Information Specialist, had worked very closely with me on planning, particularly in designating the various landing sites. Because of the close coordination involved, he ended up moving into my apartment with me. As was usual, when I returned from the embassy that evening with the radio and other assorted weaponry that had been offered, including a grenade launcher, sawed off shotgun, AR-15, PPK's, etc., Ralph was on the roof to meet me. He picked up some weapons and the radio which had the names and call signs of those persons on the net rolled up and squeezed under the handle. When we got to the apartment I noticed that the list was missing! It had apparently been blown away by the helicopter rotor wash. We feverously searched the roof and then the surrounding area with no success. The next day at the embassy I was reminded of the great security required to ensure that the list not be compromised. I really had a hard time getting another copy without arousing suspicion. It all became a moot point less than a week later.

27 APRIL: Received a call from the Air America Operations Manager requesting us to find accommodations for a customer at 259 (that was a switch). The customer happened to be a Mr. Jim Collins, who at the time supposedly was a

free lance writer out of Washington, but who had previously worked for the Embassy for some years in the Go Long and Vung Tau areas. He spent the night at 259 and the course of conversation stated that was going to see Mr. Jacobsen at the Embassy the following morning to arrange for the evacuation of military academy orphans at Vung Tau. Jacobsen told him essentially the same thing he had told me the day before. However, Collins had other contacts and ended up coordinating with an Admiral Benton, receiving a blanket approval to proceed. This was finalized late on the 28th.

28 APRIL: Collins arrived at the Air America ramp around 1730 looking for me to take him to Vung Tau for final coordination. It was understood that Air America indigenous personnel would also have an opportunity to get aboard the ship that would be set up for evacuation purposes. Due to the late hour, the only aircraft that had sufficient fuel and was available to go was 12F, a Bell 204B. After takeoff it was discovered that only the UHF radio worked, VHF and FM were inoperative. The academy people at Vung Tau were contacted and arrangements were made to have a barge at the docks starting at 0630 the following morning for transport of personnel to an MSC ship. I was to be overhead at 0600 to coordinate operations.

We departed for Saigon sometime after 1900 and made contact with an aircraft at V17 on UHF at which time we were advised that there was some activity at Saigon and we were not to go there that night. (The base was under a bombing attack). Since it was now dark and the weather was deteriorating I elected to head for the Blue Ridge which was the command and control ship for the fleet. I had visited there on a few occasions over the previous weeks to brief them on our role in any evacuation and felt they understood what the plan was. Essentially, Air America was tasked to shuttle personnel from downtown to the airport and then the military with their larger helicopters would take them out to the ships. The Blue Ridge was about 50 miles offshore. En route, I noticed the lights of three aircraft in the area and asked what they were. The response was that they knew of no aircraft in the area. We were on a one mile final for landing on the Blue Ridge when a VNAF CH-46 cut in front of us and landed, effectively blocking the small helicopter deck. We ended up diverting to the USS Denver where we spent a short night. A coordinating message was sent to Admiral Benton and he gave us the go signal for the next days mission around midnight.

29 April: In view of the unknown situation at Saigon, we departed the Denver around 0500, attempted contact with Air America with negative results, so proceeded to Vung Tau. Unable to find anyone at the docks and no barge was in sight. Went to the military academy and was advised that they were waiting for word from Collins. After unsuccessfully searching for Collins about an hour and finally making contact with Saigon, it became obvious that the evacuation was underway. Proceeded to the Blue Ridge to get fuel and also to get a situation update. At 0700 met with General Carey and asked when the Marines were going to support us. (Prior briefings had established that 6 hours prior to any evacuation, a Marine battalion would land at the airport to secure all facilities). General Carey informed me that his hands were tied and he could do nothing until given clearance was given by the Ambassador. The only information he had was that supposedly several aircraft had been downed by SA7s at Saigon.

We again departed, checked for information on Collins at Vung Tau (there was still no contact) and proceeded to Saigon. We were told to hold outside the city by relay from another aircraft and it appeared that all the other aircraft were shutting down at the airport. After about 5 minutes of orbiting, it was decided to head for the city and find out what was going on. Landed at DAO and shut down to brief. Everything was in a turmoil so decided more could be accomplished by proceeding with the evacuation of personnel. Took off with minimum fuel and a load of passengers and headed for the ships. Landed on the USS Dubuque to refuel and were told that a VNAF pilot had landed in an unmarked blue and silver UH-1H and they had thrown it overboard. Since it had no U.S. flag or Air America markings, they assumed it was VNAF. It was likely one of our XW birds (Lao registry). They felt bad about the mistake.

Continued attempts to contact Collins at Vung Tau. While on the Dubuque we managed to change our FM radio with one that had been removed from the ship that had been thrown overboard. During our next search over Vung Tau, it was noted that the city was under a heavy barrage of rockets and/or 130mm guns. Checked with people on the ground with negative results; was making another recon when suddenly we received a transmission on FM 60.00 which was our prearranged contact frequency. However, a Vietnamese was on the radio, instructing us to land and pick up Mr. Collins. It seemed peculiar that he did not use Collins' call sign "Mountain". I requested to speak with Collins directly but was constantly put off. A white panel was put out but when we descended, the people on the ground ran for the nearby bunkers and when we got to about 1,000 feet off the ground we began receiving heavy ground fire.

Under the circumstances it appeared that Collins' radio had been captured and very likely, Collins himself. Proceeded

to the academy and informed the military people there of the situation and asked them to make another recon on the ground. Was then asked to evacuate what was represented as Collins' family along with about 15 orphans and brought them out to the Blue Ridge. Checked with Vung Tau after refueling but they had no news so proceeded to Saigon. Continued shuttling people from the rooftops to the airport until fuel was required and then took a load out to the ships and refueled. Each time I checked with the folks at Vung Tau regarding Collins with negative results.

It should be noted that on the morning of the 29th, without any U.S. military security, the Air America ramp was literally overrun by Vietnamese military who took off with a number of our helicopters. One aircraft, possibly taken by an inexperienced pilot managed to get over the fence before it crashed, landing on its side. It continued to run for hours before it finally ran out of fuel. Also, as feared, our fuel supplies had been hit by incoming and our only source of fuel was from the ships which were about 100 miles away. This severely restricted our capabilities and after only a few shuttles from town we would then have to go to the ships for fuel. Alternate fuel sources would have made a big difference.

After almost 15 hours flying, we refueled on the USS Cook and made what was apparently the last Air America flight to Saigon. We circled all the landing zones but with the exception of 259, all were deserted. At 259 there were literally thousands mobbing the helipad with Vietnamese calling on the radio for pickups, while on the same frequency (45.90) what was apparently PRG (North Vietnamese), were stating that they had the helicopter in sight and would shoot it down if it attempted to land. Since there were no known Americans or third country nationals at 259 and in view of the mob problems encountered by the last aircraft attempting pickups, this pad was bypassed. We landed at DAO and departed with a load of Americans. I decided to make one last stop by the Air America ramp to see if there may have been anyone left behind. We landed next to what appeared to be an intact Volpar. For almost five minutes I toyed with the idea of transferring our people to it and having the capability of flying all the way to Bangkok or even Hong Kong. The thought of bypassing the ships and avoiding days or even weeks aboard a ship was very appealing. Although the aircraft seemed to be in good condition, I figured there had to be something wrong with it, otherwise it would not have been left behind. I was also concerned that should I shut down the helicopter and then be unable to get out with the Volpar, we could conceivably get stuck there, particularly since it was now dark. I elected to take the bird in hand and we proceeded out to the USS Blue Ridge. After being told what a good job Air America had done we were told to shut down. Upon exiting the aircraft we were frisked and all survival equipment was confiscated and thrown overboard. Communications ended at that time. We were treated as refugees and were unable to determine if our services could be further utilized.

About a week later we arrived in the Phillipines and from there flew to Hong Kong for debriefings and then back home.

SUBSEQUENT OBSERVATIONS:

1. It is unclear if the various ships were fully aware of our actual mission. On the Blue Ridge, Commander Christiansen obviously did not appreciate our key role. He forced Capt. Kendall to ditch his aircraft and tried to force another of our pilots flying 35F to ditch after making just one trip to the ship. After removing the doors, the Commander changed his mind and secured the aircraft forward. It was not utilized for the rest of the operation, although nothing was wrong with it! And this was at a time when Air America was the only evacuation capability in operation! How such a misunderstanding could have occurred, particularly aboard the command ship is hard to fathom. It was as if they were in a state of shock. (Which they may have been!)
2. It is obvious that Air America's key role in the evacuation was never understood by all concerned. Newsmen were under the impression that the Air America aircraft stolen by VNAF pilots and subsequently crashed aboard ships were manned by incompetent Air America pilots. Many also assumed that the Air America helicopters made only one way trips out to the ships, looking out only for themselves. Such was not the case and unless commanded by the ships to shut down, most continued flying until unable to do so. In over 15 hours flight time that day, I only got out of the cockpit twice. Virtually all refueling was done "hot".
3. Incidentally, there was nothing wrong with that Volpar. It was fully fueled and capable of a long flight. This was the only example I am aware of where an Air America pilot did not carry out the mission for which he was assigned. A very small blot on the record.

4. Again, the experiences we had during the evacuations of Danang and Nha Trang were repeated again at Saigon. No one was concerned about our welfare but we were expected to provide services for everyone else and then fend for ourselves as best we could. Let the record speak for itself. It is just unfortunate that the many people who, despite operating under less than ideal conditions and having little outside support, really got the job done when it counted, have never received the recognition they deserve. I salute all those fine crews and support personnel of Air America who made it happen.