

IN MEMORY OF CHIEF PILOT CAPTAIN CARL A. WINSTON
WHOSE COOL JUDGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP DIRECTED THE
FINAL DAYS OF OPERATION WITH LITTLE OR NO HELP
FROM ABOVE. AIR AMERICANS, AS USUAL, HAD TO
TAKE CARE OF THEMSELVES WHEN THINGS GOT TOUGH.

The evacuation of Saigon was the continuation of the chaos already experienced in Da Nang and later in Nha Trang. The "Brass", whether of the military or the countless other agencies, were too busy individually in general piling up points for future promotions and retirement benefits, to admit and face the fact that they could no longer continue "business as usual", but that emergency conditions existed and should have been given priority. About two years had passed since the military pull out in 1973, but little or nothing of note had been planned as the final results clearly proved.

Nearly two weeks before the do-do hit the fan, a meeting was held with the Navy and Marines to coordinate their help with Air America's efforts to remove necessary personnel when the time came. The Marines were to provide security to the Air America operations and parking area. As it happened, after a report that a few small arms rounds had hit the parking, the promised security never materialized. As a result AAM lost two large fuel trucks that were full, plus about 150 drums of fuel for the helicopters. This resulted in at least an 80% loss of our effectiveness from the very start of the evacuation. None of the helicopters were able to refuel in Saigon, but were forced to fly 60-80 miles one way out to the fleet for refueling. The Navy was not expecting us, and had to change the nozzles on the refueling lines to fit our equipment. Even the command ship, the "USS Blue Ridge" threatened to push us over the side if we landed on her deck.

Before getting into the evacuation, a little about the few weeks of panic before. The AAM personnel were all asked to move from their homes into the empty USAID building close to the airport. This way everyone was easily accounted for and two helicopters were parked on the roof so we could move about without having to face the jammed streets full of people.

The U.S. Embassy was still "business as usual" red tape and all. Still requiring paid receipts from the states for immigrant permits even after the mail slowed down and stopped. This created crowds of people in and around the embassy which made it nearly to get in or to accomplish requirements, so in the long run it was necessary to by-pass them.

About the ~~23~~rd or 24th, I took an AAM bus down town to pick up our Vietnamese AAM pilots and their wives and children. This really tore me up, as all the parents and grandparents were there saying good-by, probably forever. I hope that alot of them have rejoined their families here. I took the bus full of dependents back to the airport for processing and flying to Manila or Guam. After the paper work was finished, we were all standing outside by the ex-tennis courts when two ARVN A-37 aircraft started diving on the airport control tower. At first, I thought the VC were on the field, but then the first A-37 released a bomb about 300 yards from where we were standing. After the second bomb exploded, everyone ran for cover. Within a few minutes, there were guns

firing all over Saigon shooting at nothing. A C-130 was flying low over the city and heading east. He may have taken a few hits.

When using the AAM bus, it was easy to enter the airport past the QC police. So, I took a bunch of AAM boarding passes (to nowhere) for my future family, boarded them on an AAM bus, and moved them to the AAM cafe which remained open. They stayed there almost 36 hours before the time was right to move to the gymnasium for processing.

About 2 AM of the second night, I borrowed a Datsun sedan and moved the wives and children past the QC police, and U.S. Marines guarding the gates to the auditorium area. On the last trip with the women and children, I told the Marine at the gate that I would be back soon with the males of the families, and please don't stop me. Some of the men were of military age, and one was an officer on active duty. The Marine agreed to comply, so on the next run with the men and boys, I didn't slow down for the QC. They hollered alot, but luckily decided not to shoot. The Marine just smiled, and saluted me past.

The morning of the 29th was clear and sunny, and a bunch of us were on the USAID roof top waiting for the "go" signal and watching an ARVN C-119 aircraft circle the airport. Finally, after circling to the north, he took a fatal hit, and crashed on the airport.

About 8 AM we left the roof via the helicopter and went to the airport. Shortly, a couple of ARVN helicopter pilots came in

looking for fuel. That spooked us into taking a Huey full of pilots to the ICCS ramp to grab the ICCS helicopters. Four of them were missing even then. I managed to grab one, and in the rush, got number 886 before I remembered that a few weeks before I had spent nearly two days of trying to correct a vibration and center of gravity problem before finally giving up. Anything over 90 knots, things really started shaking, and five sand bags were put in the bottom chin bubble to offset tail heaviness.

I wound up flying all day alone. I asked for some available help, but never managed to obtain any. -- ~~Shame!!~~

After leaving the ICCS ramp, word came to shut down again and I landed on the USAID roof to wait. Rumor had it that Ambassador Bunker was walking his dog and still couldn't make up his mind -- period. He really shouldn't have had command as this was pure military business.

Finally, about 9:30 AM, the show started. All of us were given maps of the city with designated pick-up points. After 3 to 5 trips from town to the airport we had to be sure to save enough fuel to make it to the fleet to refuel. I didn't land on the USS Blue Ridge after their threat to "push me overboard", but Capt. David B Kendall did. The Navy told him to ditch the helicopter along side the ship and they would pick him up in a small boat. He didn't agree to the idea until being threatened beyond ^{@ GUN POINT} doubt, so he did, and they did.

The "Huey" helicopter carries fuel for about 2:20 hours. with our refueling points 60-80 miles away, it takes but little pencil work to realize we couldn't spend much time working over Saigon and that the loss of our fuel at the AAM ramp was a disaster. On top of that, the MACV tennis courts, where we delivered passengers was only 150-200 yards across the street from the AAM ramp and its fuel. Where were the Marines?

A few flights that day were different, like landing on a destroyer for fuel and having men asking if I was going back to Saigon. The second time I came back to the same ship, they met me with sandwiches, and apples, and smiles. I was flying alone, and probably the oldest man aboard (55). Wish I remembered the ships name.

Another time I started south to refuel, and passed a tall building near the waterfront. I saw two men waving wildly, while standing on an airconditioner on the roof. I thought they looked American, so I circled back and put one skid on the airconditioner until they climbed aboard. They had become separated, and trapped on the roof. I was welcomed for sure. This was not a designated pick-up point, so they really lucked out. It made my day also.

I had just landed some passengers at MACV tennis courts, when a General Brown approached and asked me to wait a few minutes. Soon, he came back leading the general staff of the ARVN air force. There was bread all over them. I took them to the USS Blue Ridge (by now it got word we were on the same side), but after landing, none knew how to open the Huey's sliding doors.

Instead, they pulled the red emergency handles, and dropped the windows off both sides. Was a little breezy after that!

Another call I got was to pick up four men from a roof top just to the west, and across the avenue from the Catholic church down town. There was a circle of houses among a bunch of tall trees. This house was about 3 stories tall with a wall running around the flat roof. As I was alone, I had to be careful in clearing my left side and tail from the trees and the wall around the roof. It took some time to work my way down slowly. When I finally sat down, four men came running out of a stairway and hollering that men were on the story below with guns. Three men jumped in back, but the fourth decided ht was going to ride up front with me. Early in the day, I had moved the seat full forward to prevent someone being able to sit in it.

This man was in full panic, and I kept hollering at him to get in back to no avail. His eyes were huge, and he was sweating alot. He also weighed nearly 300 lbs plus safari suit, Aussie Hat, and CAR-15. Somehow he managed to get his gut and butt into the seat, and I damn near lost the controls while he knocked them around doing it. I couldn't hit, or shoot him, as I had both hands full trying to hang on. When he finally sat down, I couldn't move the cyclic, because his gut was against it. There is a little lever near the floor to adjust your seat position. I hollered at him to pull that lever and push the seat back so I could fly.

To this day, I don't remember climbing up thru all those trees. That fat, panicky S.O.B. pulled the collective pitch control up under his arm, and we were now at least 300 feet up, and fast loosing turns on the main rotor. Meantime, I'm trying to stand on the collective to get it back from this bastard trying to kill us all. I'll never know how far we dropped RPM, but I finally got control back. They wanted to go to the Embassy roof top about two blocks away. After landing, I had to wrestle with the S.O.B. again, while he tried climbing out of the seat. I found out later that he also unloaded my brief case, with my passport, tax returns, etc., etc. I got everything back when another AAM ^(HITCHHICKER) pilot called me that he had picked up the case up from the Embassy roof top.

The rest of the day was pretty routine, three or four trips to MACV with passengers, refuel, then back to Saigon, and more of the same. About six P.M. I was working off the USAID roof top taking passengers to MACV. My last trip there, I told Mr. CIA Williams and his crew that this would be my last trip to MACV, but I would return, and take them out to the fleet with me. I returned, and picked them up, and headed south. I was low on fuel, and about half way out my fuel warning light came on (20 minutes remaining). I called the USS Blue Ridge for directions, but their radar was not working. The cruiser USS Oklahoma City's

radar was tracking me, and gave me directions to their ship. I informed them of my fuel problem, and asked if they had a "green deck" (clear to land). They replied affirmative. By now it was dark, and that fuel warning light seemed extra bright in the cockpit. I started my approach for landing, and was about a hundred yards away when I saw their helicopter tied down on the landing pad. I told them to scramble their take-off, and they asked if I could circle the ship. I replied maybe once, but no more. To their credit, that helicopter was untied, and air-borne in about three minutes. I had circled once, and was on short final doing "S" turns. I'm sure my passengers were sweating with me, as I doubt we could have gone five minutes more before going for a night swim. I left them on the Oklahoma City, refueled, and finally found the carrier USS Midway --- home for the next nine days.

Aboard the Midway, the AAM pilots bunked, and ate with squadron VF 151. One day the Captain called us up to the bridge, and inquired about our conditions. He was real friendly -- that is until one of ^{OUR (HITCHMAN)} ~~the~~ pilots complained that he couldn't find the "case of champagne" he had brought aboard. His cases of Jack Daniels were still intact, but the champagne was missing. The Captain turned red and then almost blue to hear there was booze aboard his ship. Seems the Master at Arms department was living

it up, but when the Captain called down, and told them to remove the booze it took about three minutes for two sailors to appear with two cases of Jack Daniels, ^(MAYBE EMPTY?) walk across the flight deck, and heave it over the side. Makes a man down right thirsty to think about it along with wasting J. D.

Before anyone heard the word "go" the morning of the 29th, Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky landed his helicopter on the Midway about 8 AM. Apparently, he assumed he would have diplomatic immunity for he had a brief case full of dollars, some jewelry, and nearly a kilo of white powder. Jokes were going around about the "white powder", but nothing was really said further.

About three months later I boarded a plane in Los Angeles on the way to Singapore. I sat down next to a Navy Lieutenant returning from leave. He recognized me from the Midway, and eventually the subject came around to the almost kilo of white powder. Seems the Navy had it sent to Washington to be analyzed. The report came back that it was "powered milk"! Ky was well known as the head boss of narcotics for all VN as he also controlled Air Vietnam 100%. Too bad he thought he couldn't survive without his "powered milk".

Written by: CHAUNCEY COLLARD