



About Air America	
Latest News	
Image Library	
Feature Stories	X
Site Map	

FEATURE STORIES

THE BEGINNING OF THE END By Capt. Ed Adams

As the last [or one of the last] fixed wing types to depart Saigon on 29 April 1975, I have been asked to jot down my recollections of what went on during that confusing and, for me, memorable time. I would like to beg forbearance ahead of time for those of you that saw things differently - recall the exact dates better than I do - and for the, I am sure, many misspellings of the names of people and places. Through the rosy glasses of memory, I have attempted to recall things as they happened. There may be a small amount of artistic license infused in the narrative, brought about by time - and the retelling of the story at Max's on Pat Pong, the Go Down in Hong Kong, Harvey's in DC and other watering holes frequented by those of our ilk. But - that be as it may - here is my tale.

For me the last days of Saigon began a month or so before April 29, 1975. At that time, I was Station Manager at Nha Trang - and Air Liaison for II Corps. Our first indication that things were not going well was when the NVA crossed out of Cambodia and overran Ban Me Thuot. I was roused out early one morning and advised that the senior U.S. rep.

in BMT had radioed that the city was being overrun and things looked bleak. I called Manny DeGusman, my Lead Mechanic, and asked that he startup N-54U, my Station VTB-18, for an immediate departure. Within minutes I was airborne for the 30-minute flight to BMT. Arriving overhead, I established contact with the Rep. [Ron Struheric] who reported he was safe in his villa/office - but was surrounded by NVA. I could see an M-54 Russian tank parked in front of his house with the cannon barrel pointed at the gate. At about that time, I observed what appeared to be 37MM anti-aircraft bursts above my aircraft. I was at about 10,000' and the bursts appeared to be at 12 to 13,000. I dove away [rather immediately] and then climbed to about 15,000 before I returned. The AA bursts were now below me and off to one side. I stayed in the area I was in - and apparently they could not track me at that location, as the bursts never came any closer. I stayed overhead from dawn to dusk, except for returns to Nha Trang for fuel, for the next week or 10 days. Struheric was still OK, and the NVA did not force their way into his compound. Finally the battery on his radio went dead and I lost contact. Wishing him the best, I also signed off and ceased my vigil. I later learned he was taken prisoner and held until the general POW repatriation.

The next situation, a few days later, was the report of Pleiku had been overrun. I got airborne and worked my way overhead the road to Pleiku. Lots of refugees were spotted, but no open hostilities were noted. About noon, I was requested to return to Nha Trang. Upon arrival, I was advised that some very sensitive material had been left behind in the small bunker beside the runway, and would I see if I could get two customer chaps in to destroy it. Again, going up the road, I encountered no hostile action and flying in circles - ever getting closer to the airport - I came overhead the airport with

no sign of ground fire and no hoo-rah observed at the airport.

I told the guys to get ready, and plunked my aircraft on the end of the runway, screeched to a halt beside the bunker, and they jumped out. Leaving the aircraft running, I also got out. By actual count, I noticed 14,428 locals headed toward us - all ARVN or civilians. The first group to reach the plane, were a group of 5 ARVN. I asked them [Ugh Ugh and Pointy-Talky] if they wanted out. They emphatically indicated that they did. I again P-T'd to them that if they kept the other 14,423 people away from the aircraft, they were more than welcome to accompany us. With a few well chosen bursts from their M-1 carbines [overhead the crowd] they stopped the horde in their tracks. About that time there was a rather large explosion in the bunker [which caused me to damn near jump out of my boots] and my two original guys came sprinting back and climbed aboard. I was already in the cockpit and yelled for them to let the 5 ARVN on board - which they did - and we were rolling before the door was fully closed, and airborne just as it was.

The next day, I was advised that I had to go to DC, and so packed a suitcase and left. I was there for just a few days, and was getting ready to return when I was advised that we had lost Nha Trang. For the second time - there went all my stuff - with the biggest loss, my cat. This was the end of the beginning of the end.

Upon arrival back in Saigon, with no clothes or a place to hang them, I was advised that an apartment near the airport and across from a USAID high rise apartment was available. I took it - and settled in for what was the acknowledged "Last Days of Saigon".

A few days later, I was assigned to ferry a VTB to our main maintenance base at Tainan. This was to be in formation [loose] with another VTB piloted by Capt. Zimmerman. They were small tank aircraft so required short hops to Brunei, Zamboandga, Manila then Tainan. The trip was uneventful - we did not push - making one leg per day - and arrived in good order. Our flight back to Saigon was China Airlines to Hong Kong, then Vietnam Airways to Saigon. Still in no big hurry, we stopped for an extra day in Hong Kong.

That evening, while sitting in the bar at the Ambassador Hotel, Zimmerman pulled out this humongous set of keys - threw them on the bar - and said "it's all yours - I'm not going back". I said "OK", and put the keys in my pocket. They were to his apartment - which was in the same complex as mine - and just a few doors down, as well as his car.

A few days later Paul Velte, our CEO, arrived in Saigon. His stated intention was to be the Last Man Out. Needing a place to stay, I noted to him that Zimmerman's place was fully furnished - food in the kitchen - and vacant. Being sensible, he said OK, and I gave him the key. I also noted to him that if he was going to be the Last Man Out - I would have a VTB ready, and fly him out. To this he agreed. Later that evening, the occupants of the complex had a meeting, which reviewed our individual responsibilities in case of a "TET" type overrun of the city - and our apartment coming under attack. All individual positions were well covered except for the main gate into the compound. This entrance was directly across from Zimmerman's flat - now occupied by Paul Velte. It was decided that I would approach him to see how things might go. I took an M-1 carbine, knocked at his door, and when he answered, held the weapon out. He took it in two hands, cleared it, and said "Yes Sir". I

them told him that in case of being overrun, his duty, until a 'chopper could get there, would be to keep the front gate clear. He again said "Yes Sir - anything else". I allowed that that was the main thing but reviewed our overall plan with him - and that was that.

On 28 April, I had a trip to Danang in a C-46. Things were in the process of shutting down and I returned to Saigon early - about 1600 hrs. During that period, we were keeping a 24-hour "Watch" at the airport operations office. I was scheduled to be on duty that night and decided to go home and have an early dinner first. I also had certain classified ideas in mind. Arriving home, I saw Al Brau - a neighbor in the complex, and invited him to eat with me. While we were sitting at the table, we kept hearing what at first I took to be thunder - then realized that it was not. Al and I went to the multi-story building next to my single story wing, and went up to the roof where our helicopter pick-up area was - and where we had a T/R radio. We called the base and were notified that Tan San Nhut was under bombardment by hostile aircraft and to remain where we were. This we did.

The next morning, 29 April, 1975, broke sunny with moderate cumulus clouds at about 3,000'. All seemed quiet. At that time, I still had Zimmerman's car. The first thing I did was load it with everything I could get in it. I had purchased in the local market some large wicker baskets (4 x 3 x 3) and these I stuffed full of my Stuff. I had quite a bit of this because with the exchange rate going out the roof, things in the market were VERY inexpensive those last few days. I then asked if anyone wanted to go to the airport with me. Al Brau was the only one to say yes. There were a lot of people milling around, and it was suggested that we drive across the street to the USAID apartment, where there were many Air America types living as

well as USAID staff, and see if anybody there wanted to go. This I did, and it was decided that we would "Convoy" as many cars as we could get and take all that wanted to go. Just as we were getting things lined up - some guy from the embassy came in and said "Nobody go - everybody stay here".

Well, I had all my Stuff in my [Zimmerman's] car, and I wasn't about to lose it. There was talk about the road being overrun with wild guys and maybe Viet Cong. My thought was to go slow, pay attention - and see how far I could get. So - all by myself, I drove down our lane to the main street leading into the airport. All seemed quiet out there, with a small amount of traffic going in both directions, so I proceeded on to the airport. At the Main Gate, there were copious amounts of concertina wire in all directions, and an ARVN policeman guarding it. When I pulled up, he motioned me to turn around and go away. I applied my "Simple Stupid" act [which comes easy to me] and thought I would try to out-wait him. This went on for a few minutes, and then a large blue bus - like our school busses - pulled up behind me. The guard then got more animated about me turning around and getting out of the way and was about to get physical - when I asked him who the people on the bus were. He let me know that the bus was full of people that were going to fly out that morning. At that - I leaned back - pointed to Wings on my uniform - and said, " Well, I am the pilot who is going to fly them out". With that, he jumped to attention - saluted - blew his whistle in an eardrum breaking blast - and waved me through the gate with a flourish.

Upon arrival at the Air America ramp, I drove through the flight line gate and up beside the VTB that I was going to fly Paul Velte out in. I unloaded all my baskets and suitcases on to the VTB and then drove the car back to flight line gate and parked it up against it. Then I went upstairs to

the operations section - told Mr. Velte that I was here and ready whenever he was. He said "Very good - I'll let you know" - and with that, I went out by the operations desk to see what was going on. About that time, a helicopter pilot came in and said that he had been mobbed by ARVN and others who wanted him to fly them out. He had an assigned pickup to make and needed help in getting these unauthorized people off his aircraft. I said I would help him, and picking up an M-16 [of which there were many - many laying around] I went down to the ramp with him. As he was getting into his aircraft, which was still running, I slid open the Pax Compartment door - stuck the barrel of the M-16 inside - and motioned everybody to get out. Surprisingly - they all did. The 'chopper then departed to make his assigned pickup.

Over the next hour or so - many 'choppers came in with unauthorized pax loads, landed by me, were divested of their load, and went about their business. There were many too many people on the ramp that did not belong there, so I placed a C-46 Pax loading stair up against the wall along the side of the ramp, escorted these people over to it and had them jump over - again, I had no trouble. I then noticed that a C-46 parked behind my VTB had a crowd of locals crammed in it. Figuring that these were not authorized pax - but rather the ones that I had downloaded from the 'choppers - I unloaded them all and had them jump the wall also. Then embassy types started coming from different places and asked me to get the locals that they had with them - out. I said OK, and started putting them on the recently vacated C-46. This went for locals that I recognized as well - the Maitre D' of Frigates restaurant in Nha Trang - a waiter from the airport restaurant - AAM employees not needed at that time - young ladies that spoke good English.

During a quiet spell I was walking around the ramp. I entered the Traffic building - which had a small hallway leading from the passenger lounge area onto the ramp - and ran into a group of 5 ARVN walking through to get on the ramp. I held up my right hand and told them they could not go though. The lead soldier had an M-16 which he started to raise. I had an M-16 also, but it was in my left hand - pointed to the ground - and he had the drop on me. So - before he could get his weapon fully raised - I hit him as hard as I could on the point of his chin - and cold cocked him right there. At the same time I raised my M-16, and motioned for his surprised compadres [who had not been able to see our little drama] to drag him back out of the hallway - out the door to the parking lot - and away - and I then I dropped the 4x6 bar over the door locks. I then said a nasty word, as the pain from the hand I had broken, hit me. This broken hand was - as far as I know - the only casualty of the civilian evacuation of Saigon. I believe that I heard of a Marine pilot having a problem, but I am not certain.

So - with my hand swelling up like a boxing glove, I returned to the ramp. The main noise to be noticed was the constant blast from incoming artillery/rockets. These seemed to be from all directions so I figured that an all-out assault was not in progress, just long distance shelling. Not to worry. But then I noticed that there was a pall upon the ramp - nobody was there - no aircraft were departing - no 'choppers were coming in and out. And about the time I noticed this, a round of incoming artillery hit the main hangar about 35 or 40 feet from me. "Ha" I said, "I best go see if Mr. Velte is about ready to leave." I then went up stairs to the Operations Office - only to discover that the place was empty. Mr. Velte and all the others had cut a chogie and had dee-dee mou'ed. I may not be too swift, but it dawned on me that now

might be a good time for me to also depart. With that thought, I went down to the VTB I had placed my Stuff in, and climbed into the cockpit. I then caught a glimpse of the C-46 that I had loaded with all those people. I could not leave them behind. I did not know who was scheduled to take that airplane out, but it was evident that they were not going to.

About that time, I spotted two locals walking across the ramp in my direction. I climbed back out of the VTB, waved them over, asked them if they wanted a ride out. When they replied in the affirmative - which did not surprise me - I noted to them that if they would transfer all the Stuff in the VTB - into the rear belly hold of the C-46, I would indeed fly them out. They accomplished this with great dispatch - and it was time to go.

Doing a quick walk around the aircraft to insure all the gust locks etc. were removed [More like a "Hustle" around] I noticed that there were so many people at the aircraft that they could not all fit inside. With a lot of gesticulating and grunts - all those outside - were convinced to push enough to get inside. I then made it up and managed to close the door. This was a "T" category aircraft with a regular airline interior rather than our standard cargo version with no seats. With the 52 seats fully occupied - there were about 5 people to each set of 2 seats, plus people standing in the aisle, plus people in the toilet and in the baggage area in the rear - I figure that I had about 152 pax in a 52 pax aircraft. Not to worry. With much assistance from the people in the seats and in the aisle, I managed to make it to the cockpit. An AAM mechanic was on board - and I am sorry to admit I do not remember his name. He gave me great moral support.

Starting a cold C-46 can be tricky - starting a cold C-46 with your right hand broken - and the size of a boxing glove - can be VERY tricky. But then again, sometimes you are lucky. I was - both engines started without a burp or a backfire - and we were ready. But then the VTB I had originally meant to take was just in front of us. With a hard turn, I managed to only hit one of the vertical fins, which fortunately bent over with no damage to the C-46. The Air America ramp was a couple hundred meters long - with a right turn onto a taxiway - leading out to another right turn on a taxiway parallel to runway 36 leading to the civilian ramp and runway 25. I was parked down near the terminal at the taxiway end of the ramp. Not wanting to make a mistake and leave someone, I taxied up to the far end of the ramp. There was nobody there. Turning around, I considered taking off from the exit taxiway from our ramp. Adding power, I came down the ramp right smartly, hung a right onto the taxiway, looked up and saw a DHC-4 Caribou burning on the far end. Cut the power - stand on brakes - make another right turn onto the next taxiway - start to add power again to take off there - and the civil ramp is full of burning aircraft - cut the power - hang a left turn to access runway 36 - turn onto 36 - lookup to see a C-130 burning - leave the power on turn onto the grass to cut across to runway 25 - turn onto 25 - lock the tail wheel - and see 14,483 people on the end of the runway [the same people from Pleiku?] - think they may pop a few rounds at us as we go overhead - drop flaps - suck it off way early - hang it right over the grass - gear up - accelerate - flaps up - climb power --- breathe.

Now - aware that the chap that was supposed to be flying the communications platform to relay messages from the various rooftop pickup points and aircraft returning from the various ships off shore and the command post at MACV and other as required

places had bugged out without doing his assigned task - I checked in and said that I would act as the platform. I did this while circling overhead Saigon in a constant climb - the higher, the better radio range. While passing through 18,000 [in the clouds] I came out into a small clear space [about 100 meters across] the same time two F-4 Phantoms cut through the same small clear space about 100 feet in front of me. My "Holy s---" went out over the airwaves as I had clutched the mike button rather smartly in my shock. When MACV control asked me if I had a problem, I noted to them that I had just shared a 100-meter hole with two F-4's. Control allowed at that time, that they had sufficient radio contact with the USS Blue Ridge - the aircraft carrier accepting most of our helicopter sorties - and I could proceed on my way. I replied that I was indeed on my way.

Now, in that the airport had come under bombardment the day before and the C-46 I was flying had only just before come in from a trip - it had not been refueled. It was not until this time that I thought to check my fuel. It was a bit hard to add 2+2 with the state of mind I was in, but I managed to at least figure out that I did not have sufficient fuel to reach Hong Kong. In our previous briefings, Mr. Velte had advised all pilots that every country in possible range of our aircraft had said we would be welcome to come there if necessary - Except Thailand. Thailand had advised that they were going to have to live with the Vietnamese after we were gone - and did not want any problems with them. So - what to do.

One thing for sure was in my mind - I was not going to fly extended over water. Taking my options, I turned Northwest for Thailand. I had no charts - maps - plates or any enroute or destination material. Not to worry - I was airborne, and still had at least 3 or 4 hours of fuel. The direct route

from Saigon to Bangkok was over Cambodia - very near the infamous "Parrots Beak". Knowing that this might be a Bad area, I maintained my altitude, which put most of my passengers to sleep. Nice and quiet. After 30 minutes or so I pushed the mike button and called on company frequency - "This is E.G.Adams, is anybody else up here?" Immediately, about 12 other aircraft responded. I asked where everybody was going. The standard reply was that being U-tapao was a U.S.Air Force installation, they were going there. They all figured that with U.S. personnel, they would have no problem. After a pause - Art Wilson came on the radio and asked "Where are you going Edward". My reply was "Bangkok - where are you going" Art's reply was "Bangkok". With that, it was quiet the rest of the way.

Nearing where I believed Bangkok to be, I tried a Center frequency and was pleased to hear Bangkok Center reply. I advised I was inbound to Bangkok and requested clearance. This was immediately given. As I got closer, a few radar fixes brought me right on in and I was handed off to Approach Control. I advised them that I had a few un-manifested passengers onboard, and requested they have security meet the aircraft. They replied they would pass the word. They then asked which runway I wanted - 21 Left, the military side or 21 Right, the civilian side. I replied 21 right. After being handed to the Tower, they asked where I would like to park [Air America had an area on a diagonal taxiway] I replied I would like right in front of the tower. They replied with an "O.K."

Meanwhile, as I found out later, the other chaps were not doing so well. The guys that went to U-tapao were getting nothing but a bunch of static from the U.S. Air Force personnel there. Some of them were treated rather rudely and did not come away with a good impression at all. Art Wilson, who arrived in Bangkok about an hour and a half before

me, had asked for 21 Left - the Military runway. He was still on board his aircraft when I arrived and did not get cleared for another hour. My arrival was a delight.

Upon parking in front of the control tower, we were met by a Major from Thai Security. His first words were "Welcome to Bangkok" He then allowed that everybody was welcome BUT, he did not want to find a single weapon outside the aircraft. In anticipation of this, while we were enroute I had asked one of the nice young ladies that spoke English to please have everyone with a gun to please pass it up to the cockpit. That they did - and we had a pile about 4 feet high of various arms. I showed this to the Major, and told them they were his. By then we had all deplaned and he had the passengers all lined up and was taking names and other information. While standing there talking with him in a rather pleasant and light vein, a Sergeant came up and excitedly advised the Major that a weapon had been found. The Major's countenance immediately clouded over - he rather brusquely asked to be shown where it was - and was shown to an area where all the bags and baggage from the aircraft had been lined up [except for my Stuff in the rear Belly]. The Sergeant walked down the line, had a soldier hand a 38 revolver to him, and pointed to an Elephant skin Flight Kit, with CAPT. E. G. ADAMS printed in bold letters on the baggage tag. I must have turned 18 shades of Red and advised the Major that it was mine. It was one of our Slick 38's that I carried under a false bottom in the kit - and they had found it. When the Major found it was mine, he was all smiles again, handed it back to me, and said never mind. About that time a jeep arrived at our location with large water jugs of Hot water. Many of the passengers had Trek rice packages, and the hot water was for them to prepare it. I was impressed.

At that, the Major gave me his card - said that when I was ready to leave give him a call - and we parted. I walked over to the terminal with a Sergeant who passed me through Customs and Immigration and caught a taxi to Max's. I was there having a cool one about the time they finally let Art out of the cockpit. I stayed in Bangkok a few days getting my hand set someone else ferried the plane on up to Tainan], and then proceeded to Hong Kong. There I spent the next 3 -4 months helping shut things down and then returned to the States - my days in Saigon over.