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THE FALL OF SAIGON APRIL 1975

By Capt. Fred Walker

April 15 10:30 PM Tremendous explosion. Our 70 apartment building moved. Ammo dump, Bien Hoa, went. Lots of secondary explosions. Heard today that evacuation fleet lying off Vung Tau left station and went back to Philippine Islands to replenish supplies. That will leave all Americans uncovered for 7-10 days.

16-18 NVA advancing everywhere. Massing divisions N., W. & SW. of Saigon. Tension. Helicopter pads set up at various points. Many C-141's daily. Phnom Penh fell on the 17th. Received emergency evacuation aircraft assignments. I have C-47 #43-16147.

21 Jim Voyles shot up in VTB today vicinity Phan Rang (enemy airport) put out may day. I called for helicopters, 2500, 2000, 1000 ft. but landed OK at Vung Tau, VO5. RON V32 Caribou's N11014. Went swimming on perfect beach. C-130 and seven jolly green H/C passed overhead Con Son Island this morning at 10:30 heading NE Inspiring sight and extremely good for morale. Indicates 7th Fleet in area.

22-23 Situation very tense; something imminent.
Pres. Thieu resigned.

24 1:30 PM Red alert for two hours, attack expected. Steve's restaurant asked to house entire 40 man ICCS delegation. ICCS O.I.C. said attack coming in next hour (he should know). Nothing happened, though.

9:30 PM Reed Chase came to 705 and said Gen. Giap (Geo. Washington of No. Vietnam) assassinated and Chicom troops into NV. If so, the best of best possible news. Not much fun sleeping in town (if one can sleep). Better to be at airport, but no beds. Piaster rate gone from P1200 to \$1 to P4000 to \$1 in past week. Ominous sign. Wall to wall ships off Vung Tau; four big carriers plus support ships, 7th Fleet.

25 NVA army was to attack at 0600L this morning, but didn't. That's nice. Now hear it was pro-Chinese NVA Gen. Truong Chinh who was shot and not Gen. Giap (shooting Gen. Giap would have been like shooting Geo. Washington in 1780). U.S. making many helicopter pads at airport. Moving structures, bulldozing buildings, surfacing dirt areas, cutting trees and telephone poles, etc. PX and Stop & Shop items at 1-2 price or less. No More U.S. beer for sale "quelle tragedy!" Same for liquor and wine.

26 Hear lots of bombing SW of town. Have for several days now. Many 100's of SVN refugees around main gate at airport this past week. Complete news blackout on SVN on U.S. run Saigon FM 99.9 for last six days (censorship). Some getting a bit irritable lately. In addition to not knowing whether or not we are going to get out of SVN safely, there's a constant threat of SA-7 Strela missiles when flying and new, unplotted AAA positions. Reds now have 57-MM firecan radar position 290 degrees, eight miles from airport. That's just great news. Probably

others around Saigon. Most of us have been living out of an airline handbag for weeks now. All other possessions sent away, given away or in one suitcase at airport. Atrocities at Phnom Penh public beheadings, which gives us something more to think about.

27 Tension building. Lots of rumors. Thoughts of TSN going up and us being unable to fly out. 200 police strung together at Ban Me Thuot and shot.

28 1820L Had Reed Chase's car. Left airline bag at 87 Nguyen Din Chieu and took car back to airport. Got 100 yards short of gate when heard six explosions, 500# bombs. Three NVA in VNAF A-37's from north. Three Americans in car ahead literally fell out onto ground with panicky looks and crawled around to rear door and pulled out flak jackets. Drove up beside them and asked what was problem. Unintelligible answer. Asked again and one shouted Small arms fire. I didn't hear any, nor did Capt. John Fonburg, who was with me. ARVN guard rushed up and told us to beat it. Superfluous instructions, I'd say. Drove across grass, down a one-way street the wrong way and headed for town. Both of us seriously doubted small arms report, as it was very doubtful NVA could be in that section of town.

Halfway in town tremendous traffic jam. Lots of inbound cars doing 180's and heading back to airport, which indicated 1. A traffic snarl or 2. Some terrorist activity. Just prior to reaching heavy traffic, heard multiple explosions and saw hundreds of anti-aircraft (37 & 40 mm) bursts around 2 A-37's. They missed. Re: traffic jam, not wishing to get stuck in that or to encounter terrorists, did fast 180 and drove back to 259, a USAID billet housing about 40 AAM pilots and supervisory personnel. Seven story building located about one kilometer from airport.

Went up on roof and noted many fires and much black smoke at airport. 24-hour curfew immediately imposed, so was stuck at 259. Real bright to leave airline bag at 87, Nguyen Dinh Chieu with passport, checkbook, money and other valuables. Found bed with Capt. Fred Stikkel and another helicopter captain. Met Gen. D. T. Phuong.

7:30 PM Tremendous explosion 10-15 miles NE probably Long Binh ammo dump near Bien Hoa. Helluva explosion our 112 unit apartment building moved. On roof could see many large secondary explosions on this clear night. All AAM personnel remained at point they were caught at. Some ops personnel and helicopter and fixed wing pilots at airport. Telephoned Capt. Art Wilson at 87, Nguyen Dinh Chieu and asked him to get my airline bag. He said, "Don't worry, Freddie Boo (he's an irreverent type), I shall get your bag without fail." In bed about midnight.

April 29, 1975 Awakened at 4:00 AM (J.C.) by nearby and multiple heavy explosions. On roof saw Tan Son Nhut under heavy artillery attack by 130-mm cannon, 122-mm rocket and mortar fire. Many aircraft burning. At that point we all figured that maybe we'd have to walk and swim to the 7th Fleet. Intense fire continued from 0400 to 0830 before letting up somewhat just somewhat. AAM ramp area took one hit that badly damaged 2 helicopters with minor damage to 3 more. No fixed wing a/c hit. Ops reluctant to launch helicopters for fear of drawing fire a head in sand (or some place else) attitude, as without the helicopter pilots at 259 we would not operate. After attack started, many VNAF airplanes took off C-130's, C-47's, C-119 gunships, F-5's, etc. Thought they were going to pound the reds but no such luck as they all scrambled out of the area and went to U-tapao, Thailand. Great support.

The powers-that-be finally decided that they would launch a helicopter and the first one off came to 259 about 0830 and picked 10 helicopter pilots off the roof and took them to the airport. Came right back and picked up 6 more. On third trip at 0845 eight fixed wing pilots, including myself, were taken to airport.

Much activity there plus incoming artillery, rockets and mortars in the immediate area about every minute or so. Many ground personnel in ops. Some pretty shook up. Certain amount of hesitancy about launching fixed wing aircraft, but every explosion outside further convinced me that we had worn out our welcome in Saigon. Waited around and, finally about 0930 we launched C-47 #559 and C-47 #084. Then every 10 minutes or so another AAM fixed wing aircraft took off. I finally got the O.K. to go at 10:05. Checked a/c over very briefly and was about to get aboard when Art Wilson drove up and handed me my airline bag. Extremely glad to see that. Started engines and taxied over by our hangar and boarded 24 passengers very quickly. Watched out cockpit window and as last one got on, saw many refugees climbing high cement wall behind my aircraft. Forgot to mention that during the morning some VNAF pilots stole four of our helicopters. Also, we were all armed and some operations personnel had to standoff some armed ARVN soldiers who tried to board our aircraft. Fortunately, no shooting took place.

As Capt. Ed Adams was about to board his C-46, and ARVN soldier tried to forcibly embark. Ed stopped him and the guy started to swing an M-16 around to point at him. The soldier got the gun about half way around when Ed knocked him on his ass (busting his hand in the process) and disarmed him. That ended that.

We taxied out and, as we rounded our hangar where we could see the taxiways and military and civilian ramps, a scene of utter desolation confronted us airplanes burning, bombed out and burnt out airplanes and helicopters, debris everywhere. Christ, what a sight! Immediately saw that we probably could get to the runway.

A C-130 was burning right next to the taxiway on one side with a wrecked CH-53 twin rotor a/c on the other, which was the civilian ramp. Rather than taxi between the two, which would have forced up to pass close aboard the burning C-130 which was going to blow up momentarily, I went through the civilian ramp area past the gutted terminal picking my way around baggage, wrecked automobiles, bicycles, shell holes, shrapnel you name it and rejoined the taxiway further on.

Next, at the east-west, north-south taxiway intersection, we found it partially blocked by a completely burnt out USAF C-130. There was just room to get by the tail of this hulk and we made it and swung out onto the runway which, by the grace of God, wasn't damaged and without further ado took off. With the reds all around town, we gained some altitude over the city then headed for the open sea about 25 miles away to the southeast. The airport was taking a real shellacking as we taxied out and took off but they missed hitting us. Guess we've been living right.

As it was probably all enemy territory, we didn't relax until we were well offshore. Then we took stock of our situation. We knew we only had 500 galls of gas so we couldn't go to our originally planned destination of Brunei, some 700 miles southeast. Also, we could not go to a small airstrip 125 miles south of Saigon where we had some emergency gas supplies stashed, so our only option was to head for Thailand, in spite of

knowing beforehand that the Thais didn't want any Saigon airplanes landing in Thailand. The Thais couldn't care less about refugees, their main concern was and is not offending the communists. They have now very conveniently forgotten 25 years of assistance.

When I left the ramp at Saigon, there were two C-46's and two VTB's still there but they got airborne shortly. The bombing attack the night of the 28th stopped all refueling so we ended up with four C-47's and two C-46's and one VTB heading for friendly territory in Thailand. Only one C-47, #083, had full tanks and he headed for Brunei. The helicopters continued picking up personnel around Saigon and ferrying them to the aircraft carriers offshore the rest of the morning, finally ceasing operations at 6:30 PM. That ended AAM's flight operations after some 25 years in Southeast Asia. We lost some airplanes and much equipment but, thank God, no one was lost/hurt in this final operation.

The company did a fantastic job in the last 2-1/2 decades and we closed it out with a clean slate. On the debit side, pause and think that the reds have forcibly taken over two countries in the last 13 days. Cambodia on April 17th and South Vietnam on April 30th. Two black dates for millions of people and a real blot on our escutcheon.

Enroute to Thailand we established intership VHF communications and concluded that we would receive a less hostile reception at the USAF base at U-Tapao, some 75 miles SSE of Bangkok, so we all landed there.

With our short supply of fuel, a plus was that the weather was beautiful blue skies all the way enroute. We in our C-47 flew down the coast of Vietnam a ways then, because of our fuel situation, took a deep breath and at 8500 feet headed across

the enemy held delta to the ocean on the other side, a distance of about 80 miles. Made that leg uneventfully, proceeded along about 15 miles off the south coast of Cambodia then up the Cambodian west coast and on into Thailand and U-tapao. Didn't figure any Cambodian fighters would bother us in international waters and saw none.

Landed at U-tapao and received a warm welcome from the USAF personnel. The first man I met at the foot of the ladder was a Sergeant and the first thing he said was that he had seen both me and my copilot many times in Udorn, Thailand in 1968 and why the hell didn't we stop sticking our necks out and retire. Good to see a friendly face.

The first thing I saw after landing was half the Vietnamese Air Force. There were 70 odd VNAF planes parked around the south end of the airport. I counted a full squadron (25) of F-5 fighters, six C-130'S, four C-7A Caribou's, nine C-47's, ten Douglas AD fighter-bombers, four C-119 transports, a couple of C-119 gunships plus a scattering of other types. Had mixed emotions upon seeing the F-5's and AD's parked there.

In all we landed four AAM C-47's and one VTB at U-tapao. One C-47 had a complete hydraulic failure shortly after takeoff at Saigon and after a successful landing at U-tapao, ran off a taxiway and into a ditch, collapsing one main gear in the process as well as tearing off the tail wheel and twisting the tail structure. No one hurt, fortunately.

We stood around in the 100-degree heat for about five hours and then the Base Commander, a full Colonel, advised us that he needed the ramp space and that we would all have to go to Bangkok. That little order made my day as my apartment is in Bangkok. So we finally left U-tapao at 10:15 PM and arrived at 11:00 PM in Bangkok.