

the MAG-36 medium and light helicopters, now members of ProvMAG-39 and in position on the decks of the other ships in the task force. These helicopters, CH-46s, UH-1Es, and AH-1Js (Cobras) were an integral part of the pre-L-Hour preparations and could not be pushed aside or relocated to other deck space. They had to fit into the flow pattern because each one had a support or rescue role in the overall operation. Their missions included everything from sea and air rescue to carrying 15-man, quick-reaction "Sparrow Hawk" teams of Marines from Company A, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines.²⁶

The 9th MAB planned to use two Sparrow Hawk teams, with each one on board a CH-46. These two CH-46s would then orbit along the evacuation route, positioned to assist any helicopter in distress. In the event that the NVA shot down a helicopter or a mechanical malfunction forced one to make an emergency landing in enemy-held territory, a Sparrow Hawk team stood ready to land and provide security. Its defensive perimeter would then enable a sea and air rescue (SAR) helicopter to pick up the crew. Besides

this support, two CH-46s would provide medical evacuation capabilities while the Cobras would fly cover for the transport helicopters and, if possible, for anyone else who requested it. In addition, the Cobras could serve as Tactical Air Coordinators (Airborne) or Forward Air Controllers (Airborne). Another critical means of support would be provided by the UH-1Es, a command and control platform for General Carey, Colonel Gray, and Colonel Frank G. McLendon, the ProvMAG-39 commander. Thus, crossdecking for the initial transport waves would have to integrate the medium and light helicopters into the overall flow pattern, adding one more factor to the already complicated process.²⁷

With all these helicopters in a relatively small airspace, control and safety became paramount considerations. The demanding and important task of safely controlling the skies over South Vietnam had to be shared by two Services, the Navy and the Air Force. Admiral Whitmire retained responsibility for air control over the water, or "feet wet," while General Burns as USSAG/Seventh Air Force commander (call sign

A 9th MAB "intel" picture numbers LZs 34 and 35 in the Annex and 36-38 in the Alamo. Alamo LZ 39 is outside the photo, top left; Air America terminal LZ 40 was not used.

Marine Corps Historical Collection



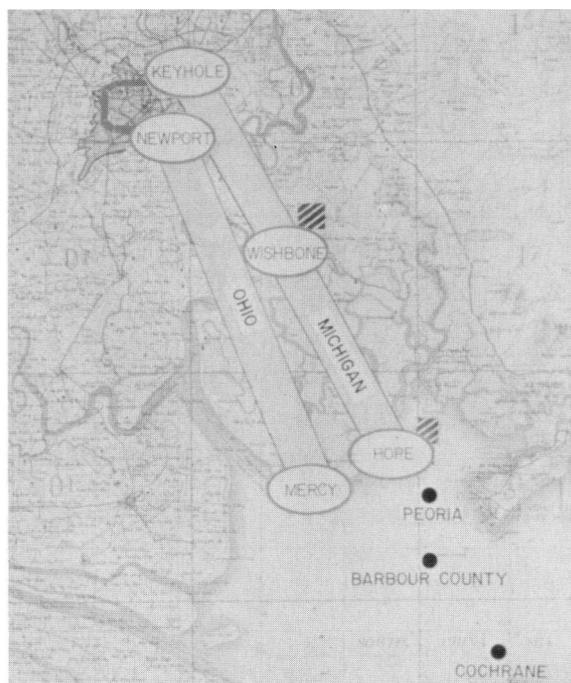
“Blue Chip”) controlled all aircraft “feet dry,” over land. The on-scene, local control rested with the airborne mission commander (AMC). For the first six hours of the operation, Colonel John J. Roosma, Jr., USAF, served as the AMC. Located in an airborne C-130 designated the Airborne Battlefield Command and Control Center (ABCCC), he answered to the radio call sign of “Cricket.”²⁸

The commanding officer of ProvMAG 39, Colonel McLenon, exercised control of his Marine aircraft through the Tactical Air Coordination Center (TACC) on board the *Blue Ridge*. The Helicopter Direction Center, on board the *Okinawa*, maintained aircraft spacing and routing. It also passed directions to aircraft outbound from Saigon, informing them which deck space was available for unloading and refueling and relaying any other pertinent landing data. In addition, Admiral Whitmire designated the *Okinawa* as the primary control for over-water helo operations, with *Hancock* as backup should the *Okinawa* suffer damage or equipment failure.²⁹

The primary difference between TACC and HDC was that TACC controlled the tactical disposition of the helicopters and HDC controlled the helicopters as long as they were in the Navy’s airspace. These areas of responsibility often overlapped and at times even merged. Under the conditions existing on the morning of 29 April 1975, the difference in control responsibilities of TACC and HDC at best seemed blurred, at worst redundant.

To address flight safety, the 9th MAB staff prescribed altitudes, routes, and checkpoints for the operation. To avert mid-air collisions, the planners chose altitudes which would not only provide separation of traffic but also a capability to see and avoid the enemy’s SAM and SA-7 missile threat (6,500 feet for flights inbound to Saigon and 5,500 feet for those outbound from Saigon to the Navy ships). In addition, these altitudes were high enough to avoid small arms and artillery fire. To further reduce the missile threat, HMMH-462 painted its helicopters with infrared paint. HMMH-463 had already painted its helicopters, but HMMH-462 did not have an opportunity to modify its CH-53s until after the evacuation of Phnom Penh (reports had indicated an absence of SAMs in Cambodia). Despite all the concern over these obvious threats, the weather still remained the gravest danger.

At the beginning of the operation, pilots in the first wave reported the weather as 2,000 feet scattered, 20,000 feet overcast with 15 miles visibility, except in haze over Saigon, where visibility decreased to one



Marine Corps Historical Collection

This is one of the briefing maps used for Operation Frequent Wind. Along these routes were stationed two airborne CH-46s, each with a 15-man, quick-reaction force on board designated a “Sparrow Hawk” team.

mile. This meant that scattered clouds existed below their flight path while a solid layer of clouds more than two miles above their heads obscured the sun. Additionally, the curtain of haze, suspended over Saigon, so altered the diminished daylight that line of sight visibility was only a mile. The weather conditions would deteriorate as the operation continued. Captain Edward J. “Jim” Ritchie, flying a MAG-36 CH-46 from the *Hancock*, recalled his first sortie into Saigon at approximately 1830: “The sky was completely overcast, meeting the ground in the distance with the lights of the city and the burning buildings reflecting off it, giving one the sensation that you were seeing a strange movie about the Apocalypse.”³⁰

Although all these factors, including the enemy’s proximity to Saigon, had to be considered, General Carey never hesitated in making his decision to insert a battalion of Marines into the DAO Compound. Despite the unknown variables of size of crowds, numbers of refugees, degree of crowd control, and South Vietnamese military reaction, General Carey believed this was the appropriate show of force. With the size of the security contingent decided and his preparations complete, General Carey boarded a UH-1E



Photo courtesy of LtCol William R. Melton, USMC

The first section of CH-53s approaches the DAO landing zones. At 1506 the first helicopters of HMH-462 touched down at the Alamo, officially beginning Operation Frequent Wind.

helicopter and at 1315 departed the *Blue Ridge* for the landing zone.³¹

At 1350, a section of Huey helicopters landed at the DAO Compound and discharged its passengers, General Carey and Colonel Gray. During their approach to the compound, they experienced a first-hand view of the enemy's firepower. The NVA was shelling nearby Tân Sơn Nhut Airport with ground, rocket, and artillery fire. Upon touching down after an uneventful but exciting flight, General Carey exited the lead helicopter followed by Colonel Gray from the second Huey. They quickly established an austere command post in preparation for the arrival of the Marine CH-53s and the ground security force.³²

Proceeding by way of Point Hope, the initial checkpoint and the spot where the *Peoria* positioned itself to pick up any downed pilots, the first wave checked in with Air Force control. Upon contact with Cricket, the flight radioed its next checkpoint, Keyhole, and its destination, the DAO Compound. Just prior to passing Keyhole, Cricket directed Lieutenant Colonel Bolton and his squadron to switch to the landing zone

controller's frequency. After an initial radio check, Bolton requested and obtained clearance into the zone for his flight, and the first wave started landing at 1506. At that moment, it was 0306 in Washington, the same day, 29 April 1975, and 2106, 28 April, at the CinCPac Command Center in Honolulu, Hawaii.

Greeted by the cheers of a crowd of American and South Vietnamese evacuees, the Marines of BLT 2/4 rushed to their assigned positions in the sector. They wasted no time in establishing a security zone to protect the 679 people in the compound who were waiting to board the helicopters. (The evacuees in the compound at 1500 represented only those who had been pre-staged for the initial lift. Subsequent refugees were organized as they arrived.) Years later, the Defense Attache, General Smith, described the crowd's mood: "The Vietnamese were undeniably sad and even apprehensive but throughout it all very calm. The Americans were also sad but perhaps for different reasons."³³

After loading the first group of evacuees, the 12



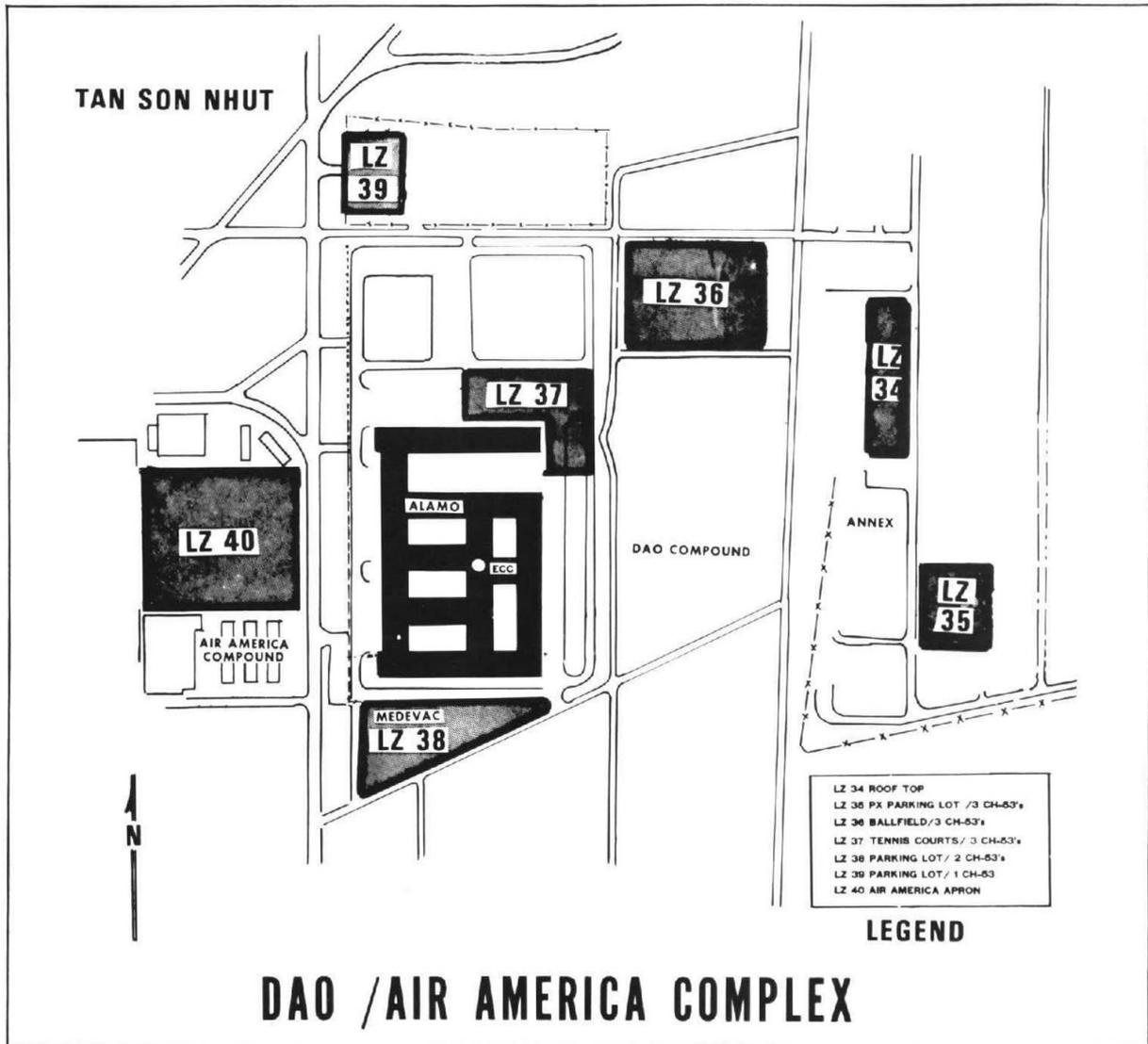
Photo courtesy of Capt Russell R. Thurman, USMC (Ret)

First evacuees from the DAO compound are seen alighting from an HMH-463 Sea Stallion. HMH-463 helicopters made up the second wave of security forces to enter the compound.

Marines of BLT 2/4 guard the perimeter of the DAO Annex landing zones during the first hours of the evacuation of Saigon. LZs 34 and 35 were located here and all operations from the Annex were completed before sunset, which occurred at 1847 on 29 April.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A150965





A map produced by the 9th MAB staff illustrates the layout of the DAO compound and the landing zones. Note locations of Air America terminal, Annex, and Alamo.

HMH-462 CH-53Ds left the compound and flew out-bound via Newport Pier to the task force. In doing so, they attempted to maintain a visual separation of 1,000 feet from the inbound second wave. When the first wave reported "feet wet" at Point Mercy to the HDC controller on the *Okinawa*, its helicopter pilots received vectors to ships with enough deck space to accommodate them. Landing on these ships at 1540, they unloaded the first refugees delivered by Operation Frequent Wind.³⁴

As the second wave loaded the next group of evacuees in the DAO Compound, Lieutenant Colonel Slade reinforced his positions with the newly arrived Marines from the second increment. The DAO Com-

pound lent itself to easy access by air, but its configuration made security difficult. Slade's scheme of maneuver called for deployment of his "Alpha" command group, two rifle companies, and his 81mm mortar platoon around the DAO headquarters building (the Alamo) and its adjacent landing zones. The "Bravo" command group led by the BLT 2/4 executive officer, Major Thornton L. "Luke" Youngman, consisted of two rifle companies and the 106mm recoilless rifle platoon. It assumed responsibility for security of the DAO Annex and its adjoining landing zones.

Using an east-west axis which bisected the Alamo defensive perimeter, Lieutenant Colonel Slade had Captain Matthew E. Broderick deploy his Company

E Marines to the northern half of the zone while Captain Thomas A. Keene's Company F occupied the southern section. At the Annex, Captain William R. Melton moved his Company G Marines into the eastern section of a perimeter using a north-south axis. At the same time, Captain Steven R. Bland's Company H assumed control of the western sector.³⁵

As the number of refugees decreased, so did the size of the zone. Despite continuous adjustments in the perimeter resulting from the reconsolidations, BLT 2/4 attempted to incorporate the existing defensive features of the compound, including the bunkers and barbed wire entanglements.³⁶

Originally, General Carey had intended to deploy a command group and a company from BLT 1/9 to the Air America Compound as additional landing zone security. However, after assessing the relative security of the two areas in the DAO Compound and consulting with Colonel Gray on the apparent success of the South Vietnamese defensive stand at Tan Son Nhut Airport, he decided to cancel the BLT 1/9 security mission. To insure effective command and control, General Carey remained in the compound.³⁷

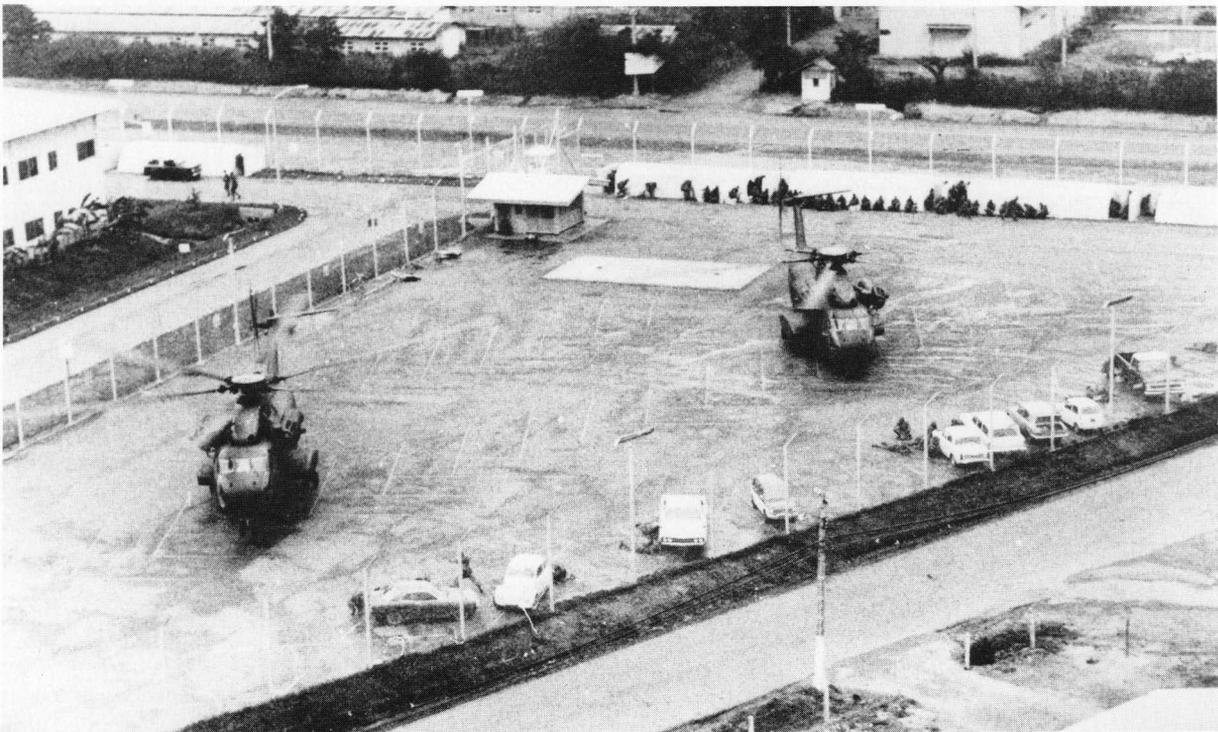
The evacuation of the DAO Compound continued like clockwork. When a helicopter arrived, the guides moved the evacuees from the staging areas directly to the ramps. Bending down as they approached the swirling rotor blades, the refugees then climbed on board the waiting CH-53 as the guides returned to the assembly area.

Aircraft loads varied in size depending upon the type of helicopter used. Besides those flown by the Marine Corps, the Air Force (USAF had eight CH-53Cs and two HH-53s deployed on the *Midway*) supplied 10 from its nearby bases in Thailand. Each model's load capacity (a factor of its internal configuration), adjusted for fuel, determined the number of evacuees that a particular helicopter could carry on that sortie. The landing zone marshals had to keep these factors uppermost in their minds as they prepared each load. Once a decision as to the number of passengers had been made, the marshals would then communicate that information to the guides. When loads exceeded the planned limit of 50, signals between guides and marshals became especially critical. Complicating everyone's ability to communicate was the helicopters' deafening rotor blade noise and their electronic interference with hand-held radios. This interference severely limited the marshals' ability to relay such important information as the size of the evacuee popu-

lation. This particular data provided the landing zone controllers and the guides a general idea of how many more flights would be required to move the remaining evacuees. To be certain that the correct numbers reached the intended party, the marshals and the landing zone controllers used a colored signal paddle system to communicate. In addition, the controllers (Alamo controllers handled landing zones 36, 37, 38, and 39 while the Annex controller covered LZs 34 and 35) advised the marshals of the number of inbound helicopters and their estimated time of arrival. They also used this link to pass information about troop movements including the status of the Sparrow Hawk teams as well as the progress of the evacuation. The news of more flights headed toward the compound, when relayed to the refugees, significantly lowered their anxiety levels. Oftentimes, these people thought they had already witnessed the departure of the last helicopter. The calming effect this reassuring news had on the refugees definitely aided the Marines in maintaining order and control in the staging area.

Unfortunately, coordination and control of the overall embarkation operation suffered from more serious communication problems. Direct communications with Admiral Whitmire and 9th MAB Rear were sporadic, at best, requiring a continuous relay by the ABCCC (airborne C-130 equipped with several types of radios). Added to the already heavy traffic, these relays served to create confusion on the radios. One of the first instances of using the ABCCC to pass information from the DAO Compound (9th MAB) to 9th MAB Rear occurred when the ABCCC (Cricket) radioed that General Carey had reported at 1350 that he was ashore and in radio contact with his prospective operational commander, General Burns.* About an hour before, the Annex and Alamo landing zone controllers had used the ABCCC to communicate their status, the weather, enemy activity, and landing zone conditions. Later in the operation, the controllers would have to repeat this unusual procedure in order to ensure that important data reached the commanders. The ABCCC eventually relayed to the task

*General Louis H. Wilson, Jr., FMFPac commander during Operation Frequent Wind, later remembered his concerns over the command relationship in USSAG's theater of operations. According to General Wilson, "There was no clear passage of command ashore, therefore the naval chain of command continued to act as though they were still in operational control. General Carey failed to officially report ashore or 'chop' to General Burns and a Marine has the responsibility once he has established his command post ashore to make a hard copy, reporting for operational control to his new commander." Wilson Comments.



Landing Zone 38 received some of the first CH-53s on 29 April. The accompanying picture is a view from the Alamo of the same landing zone, taken while Tân Sơn Nhut Air Base burned in the background.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A150960
Marine Corps Historical Collection

force the following types of information: the arrival of the security force, the number of evacuees extracted, the number remaining, and the status of the evacuation helicopters. Fortunately for all concerned, contact with the ABCCC remained satisfactory throughout the operation, with two nets always functioning.³⁸

Despite the additional communication workload, Cricket and the landing zone controllers still performed their functions and deftly controlled air operations over South Vietnam. The ABCCC would pick up control of inbound aircraft as soon as they reached landfall, and then at checkpoint Keyhole, hand them off to the Alamo and Annex controllers. They in turn would direct the flight leaders to the first available zone. If no sites were available, the helicopters would orbit near Keyhole, though instances of holding were rare during daylight hours. With nightfall approaching and the security force consolidating its position, that changed. As the pilots and controllers adjusted to the darkness and the shrinking number of landing zones, holding became routine, normally lasting no longer than five minutes.





Photo courtesy of Capt Russell R. Thurman, USMC (Ret)
BLT 2/4 Marine sleeps on hangar deck of USS Okinawa prior to the word to execute Operation Frequent Wind. Well into the evacuation at 2205, control of operational phases at the DAO compound shifted to BLT 2/4 as the landing zone control teams departed.

Both during the day and at night, upon initial radio contact, the Alamo and Annex controllers would provide the inbound pilots with the latest winds and landing zone conditions including enemy fire and any unusual activity along their intended route of flight. Soon, even with the threat of deadly SAM missiles, darkness became the most important consideration, especially during the approach to the zone. The pilots could no longer see the landing area, and even worse, they had no way to distinguish nearby obstructions from the surrounding darkness.³⁹

Existing lighting in LZs 36 and 37 at the Alamo, augmented by automobile headlights and portable lighting equipment, was enough to at least keep these two zones illuminated. For guidance into the zone the controllers initially used a strobe light, but its effectiveness was limited by the large number of fires and the flashes of tracer rounds and antiaircraft fire near the DAO Compound. Worse, the strobe light posed a threat to some of the Marines on the ground. Major David E. Cox and his team of controllers shared the rooftop of a DAO building with the strobe light, further exposing a position already highly vulnerable to

attack. While the strobe flashed its welcoming beacon to inbound pilots, it also sent an invitation to snipers and enemy small arms. Consequently, the radio soon replaced the strobe as the method for terminal guidance. As a means of identification, flight leaders would turn on their landing lights in a set sequence of short flashes, to which Major Cox and the controllers would respond with radio-transmitted vectors to the landing zone. Major John F. Guilmartin, Jr., the senior Air Force pilot on the *Midway*, related his impressions of this process: "Major Cox and his people were very cool and professional. Their landing procedure worked like a champ."⁴⁰

After arriving, and during the process of loading, the pilots would request clearance to depart. Unless crowded skies made it more judicious to hold on the ground, the helicopters were immediately granted permission to takeoff. Once clear of the zone, the pilots would switch to Cricket for vectors and the passing of extraction totals to General Carey. The ABCCC relayed the same totals to General Burns as well.* Each flight repeated this cycle while Major Cox and his controllers watched from their "box seats," atop the DAO building.

Throughout the period they controlled the air traffic at the compound, Major Cox and his team observed extensive enemy fire throughout Saigon including the artillery and rocket fire impacting at nearby Tan Son Nhut. Numerous South Vietnamese pilots attempted to escape by flying their aircraft off the Tan Son Nhut runway for a one-way flight to either Thailand or the sea and the waiting American fleet. Adding to the excitement of this spectacular show was the occasional round which would hit near the DAO Compound, but not close enough to damage the compound's buildings.** Numerous blazes, so intense

*Major Guilmartin offered his recollections of this phase of the operation: "This part of the system had broken down by dark and we were not even bothering to pass totals on to 'Cricket.' I can testify from personal observation that 'Cricket' had no evident command of the tactical situation." Guilmartin Comments.

**Captain Wood recalled years later the consequences of the shelling of the DAO Compound: "When I returned to the DAO that afternoon (29 April) with the last convoy, I discovered that my quarters (a trailer) had taken a direct hit and everything had burned. All I had left were the clothes on my back." Wood Comments. Major Guilmartin noted: "When we began our initial descent into the DAO Compound at around 1530 hours local, our radar homing and warning device was indicating the presence of three SA-2 batteries to the north and northeast of Tan Son Nhut, all of them within range. In commenting on the hostile fire I would note that . . . I and my crew saw a fair amount of fire and returned it. . . ." Guilmartin Comments.

that an hour's heavy rain did not diminish them, kept the controllers alert and aware of the ever-present danger of the advancing NVA. At 2205, one minute shy of seven hours after the first extraction helicopter had arrived, the controllers received word that their mission was complete.* At that point, they vacated the rooftop and proceeded to the DAO theater for extraction. Control of the remaining operation at the compound shifted to BLT 2/4.⁴¹

All during this operation and for the duration of Frequent Wind, BLT 3/9 stood ready to back up BLT 2/4, serving as the MAB and RLT 4 battalion in reserve. On board the USS *Denver* (LPD 9), Lieutenant Colonel Robert E. Loehe and his battalion were prepared for any contingency, even an amphibious landing on Vung Tau Peninsula. In addition to planning for an amphibious assault on the beaches of Vung Tau, BLT 3/9 also provided two platoons for Sparrow Hawk missions. Although not used or inserted ashore in South Vietnam, BLT 3/9's presence as a ready reserve provided General Carey and his staff with the all important reassurance that they had a guaranteed source of reinforcements.⁴²

Another group of Marines who contributed, but did not see direct action were the EA-6 pilots of Marine Composite Reconnaissance Squadron One (VMCJ-1). To provide electronic countermeasure capabilities, the commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel William A. "Art" Bloomer, temporarily assigned two aircraft and three crews from the *Midway* to the *Coral Sea* for Operation Frequent Wind. Lieutenant Colonel Bloomer stated: "I sent three pilots, two ECM operators, and 14 support personnel to *Coral Sea*. From the time the operation commenced on 29 April at about 1500 hours until 0600 on the morning of 30 April this small group of Marines kept jamming radar signals identified with the Firecan radar that controlled the 37mm air defense weapons of the NVA. Major Marty Brush [Major Martin C. Brush] led this small contingent to the *Coral Sea* . . . [and] . . . their round-the-

*General Smith, the Defense Attache, remembered: "I departed with my staff shortly after 2000 hours. I recall that there were no evacuees subsequent to then." Smith Comments. At the other end of his trip on Air Force helicopters, General Smith was welcomed on board the *Midway* by Lieutenant Colonel William A. "Art" Bloomer, commanding officer of VMCJ-1. Lieutenant Colonel Bloomer related: "The Defense Attache in Saigon, Major General Homer D. Smith, Jr., USA, and his last remaining staff officers, including Lieutenant Colonels Anthony Lukeman and William McKinsty, were evacuated by Air Force helicopters to *Midway* where myself and the Marines of VMCJ-1 made them feel at home with the few remaining amenities." Bloomer Comments.

clock effort flying from an unfamiliar carrier deck." Their support typified the unsung contributions of the thousands of American military men who together made the evacuation of the DAO Compound and the American Embassy possible.⁴³

The Embassy

Soon after BLT 2/4 arrived at the DAO Compound, the American Embassy notified General Carey that over 2,000 people needed to be evacuated from the Embassy. This came as a complete surprise since no one had planned for a major evacuation from this location. With a landing zone that could only accommodate one CH-53 and a rooftop that would hold only one CH-46 on its landing pad, General Carey ordered an immediate adjustment in the helicopters' assigned priorities. Cricket, the ABCCC, immediately started directing helicopter traffic to either the compound or the Embassy, depending on the helicopter's size and the space available at the Embassy. Many of the *Hancock's* 46s started launching approximately one hour before sunset to remove the ever growing crowd of Vietnamese refugees. This was to be the most demanding and time-consuming part of the entire operation.⁴⁴

To provide additional security and assistance to the Marines already guarding the Embassy, General Carey removed three platoons (130 men) of BLT 2/4 from the DAO Compound and inserted them into the Embassy Compound between 1900 and 2100. These Marines assisted the Embassy guards in controlling the multiplying Vietnamese crowd. First Lieutenant John J. Martinoli, Jr., a forward air controller (FAC) from

This is an aerial view of the American Embassy in Saigon. The Embassy was never considered a primary helicopter evacuation site because it had a rooftop zone which could handle nothing bigger than a CH-46.

Marine Corps Historical Collection

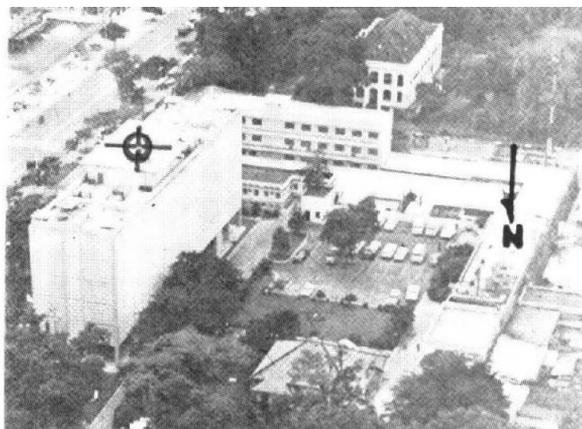




Photo courtesy of Capt Russell R. Thurman, USMC (Ret)

Members of Company G, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines return from Saigon to USS Vancouver on 30 April. They had reinforced security at the Embassy during Operation Frequent Wind.

BLT 1/9, joined them with his landing zone control team, bringing the total Marine complement at the Embassy to 171.⁴⁵

This team assisted in the landing and loading of the CH-46s, the first of which touched down in the zone at about 1700. Additionally, CH-53s began landing in the small and very confined Embassy parking lot. Late that afternoon, Ambassador Martin had authorized the removal of a large tree which had been obstructing helicopter access to that area of the compound.*

*Opinions vary on the conduct at the Embassy on 29 April concerning preparations of the landing zone. General Smith offered his thoughts: "I wonder if the Ambassador was the authority for cutting down the Baobab tree in the Embassy courtyard. I believe it was otherwise and the tree was cut down in the morning or early afternoon and not necessarily by Marines." Smith Comments. Admiral Steele remembered it somewhat differently: "Ambassador Martin's unrealistic attitude towards the evacuation is exemplified in the delay in his personal authorization to cut down the tree in the Embassy compound that prevented helicopter access. Having failed to initiate the evacuation in a timely way so that the majority of evacuees could be taken from Tan Son Nhut Airfield as the plan envisioned, the Ambassador still was not taking those actions large and small necessary to facilitate matters." The Seventh Fleet commander added that he "had been urgently recommending that the evacuation occur two days earlier than it did because of the approach of North Vietnamese forces, and on the 27th the forecast of bad weather which could obstruct or prevent flight operations." Steele Comments.

The landing situation at the Embassy gradually deteriorated as daylight receded. The groups of Vietnamese in and around the Embassy grew in size and aggressiveness as their chances for escape diminished. Restricted deck space to load passengers, small landing zones, hostile fire, poor communications, and darkness did nothing to make the Marines' job any easier.⁴⁶

Exactly the opposite situation existed at Tan Son Nhut. With the evacuation at the DAO Compound proceeding swiftly and flawlessly, General Carey decided at about 1730 to extract the 3d Platoon, Company C of BLT 1/9. Inserted on 25 April to assist the Marine Security Guard at the compound in maintaining security and control, the 3d Platoon, led by First Lieutenant Bruce P. Thompson-Bowers, had borne the brunt of the rocket and artillery fire directed at the compound on the evening of the 28th and the early morning of the 29th.⁴⁷ Yet despite the intensity of the attack Lieutenant Thompson-Bowers' platoon had suffered no casualties.

Mindful of the inherent dangers and the political and military implications of augmenting the American security force with additional Marines, the MAB had sought higher approval. As a consequence, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, with the Ambassador's expressed agreement, authorized the insertion of a platoon of



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A150961

Vietnamese board CH-53s in LZ 39, a parking lot. The 9th MAB extracted 395 Americans and 4,475 Vietnamese and third-country nationals, evacuating the last shortly after 2000.

Marines. Its safe evacuation on the evening of 29 April successfully concluded the effort to bolster DAO security.⁴⁸

Shortly thereafter, General Carey directed that the remaining elements guarding the Annex be withdrawn (at 1930) to the Alamo where the last of the evacuees would await their flight. Once completed, the new defensive perimeter encompassed LZ 36 and the Alamo. Less than an hour later, the Marines at the DAO loaded their last group of evacuees, bringing the total evacuated to 395 Americans and 4,475 Vietnamese and third-country nationals.⁴⁹ Lieutenant Colonel Jim Bolton said it went so smoothly that his only concern was not enemy fire, but running into another helicopter.* He said, "I told all of my pilots to turn on their lights to help avoid a mid-air collision."⁵⁰

At 2250, with the evacuation of the landing control teams from the Annex and Alamo completed, General Carey ordered the withdrawal of the ground security forces from the DAO Compound. Just after midnight (0030) on 30 April, thermite grenades, having been previously placed in selected buildings, ignited as two CH-53s left the DAO parking lot. These helicopters carried the last elements of BLT 2/4, including Captain McManus and Master Sergeant East,

*Major Guilmartin, the Air Force HH-53 pilot on *Midway*, recalled: "I saw numerous '53s' running blacked-out and in order to be seen, I had my wingman, Captain Vernon Sheffield (the only other HH-53 helicopter commander involved in Frequent Wind), turn on, as I had, his top anti-collision lights while leaving the lower lights off so as to avoid an SA-7 lock-on." Guilmartin Comments.

the EOD Marines.** Between the time of their departure and the Marines' arrival on *Okinawa* (at 0046), enemy fire directed at the DAO buildings more than doubled. The evacuation of personnel from the compound had lasted nine hours and involved over 50 Marine Corps and Air Force helicopters.⁵¹

Prior to leaving the DAO, General Carey talked on the phone with Ambassador Martin and learned that, for unknown reasons, the flow of helicopter traffic had ebbed. The general attempted, through various channels, to ascertain the reason for what amounted to only a trickle of helicopters arriving at the Embassy. Before relinquishing command of the compound forces to Colonel Gray, General Carey determined that if the flow of helicopters was reestablished, the evacuation could be completed in a relatively short time. To insure security at the Embassy until the conclusion of the evacuation, General Carey decided to use platoons from BLT 1/9 as ground security forces in reserve. At times, they were even sent aloft as heliteams with orders to reinforce the ground security force at the Embassy, but each time, at the last possible moment, they received word to return to the ship. (The last such incident occurred at 0530 on the 30th.)⁵²

**These Marines along with Major Sabater and Captain Petry spent many of their last hours in the DAO compound burning some of the 13 million dollars that had arrived earlier that month. Colonel Taylor said, "The EOD duo with the Advance Command Element also destroyed three barrels of money at the DAO Compound." Taylor Comments. Captain Wood recalled: "When I returned from Saigon with the last convoy around 1800, Major Sabater and Captain Petry were burning money as fast as they could shovel it onto the fire." Wood Comments.

With the Embassy's security high on his list of priorities and very much on his mind, General Carey departed the compound at 2250, leaving Colonel Gray in command of the withdrawal of the ground security force. When he arrived on the *Blue Ridge*, having made an intermediate stop on the *Midway*, General Carey wasted no time in attempting to discover why the sortie rate had decreased. Admiral Whitmire (CTF 76), out of concern for flight safety, had halted all flights to the Embassy. (The only flights arriving there during this period were ones which had been diverted from the DAO Compound for lack of passengers.) Pilots had been flying for over 12 hours, weather conditions had deteriorated, and lighting in the zone had become either poor or nonexistent. To make matters worse, there were reports that the Embassy was on fire. In fact, Embassy personnel were burning American money in a barrel next to the landing pad on top of the building. Additionally, navigation to Saigon had become even more difficult as a line of thunderstorms stood astride the flight path, and upon arrival, the pilots would often have to use their instruments to land. Considering all these factors, the commander of Task Force 76 thought a halt to flight operations was warranted, even though he had not consulted with General Carey.*⁵³

With the Cobra helicopters acting as pathfinders, the pilots had been able to navigate under adverse conditions with success. Knowing this, General Carey believed that the flights could be continued safely. Captain Ritchie remembered the same thoughts, "We had flown so many sorties over the same route already that the weather was less a factor than finding a place to land once we got to the Embassy."⁵⁴

Learning that serious consideration was being given to discontinuing all flights until first light, General Carey, a Marine aviator confident in the skills of his fellow pilots, felt that Saigon would be in the hands of the North Vietnamese by dawn. He knew that he had to press for immediate resumption of all helicopter flights to speed up the lift from the Embassy. He

convincingly argued in favor of continuing flight operations and when Admiral Whitmire agreed, he promptly ordered the launch of Marine Corps CH-53s and additional CH-46s. In General Carey's words, "I was damned angry at his stopping my helos, and I made this point in no uncertain terms. Had I not had to return to the *Blue Ridge* it was my intention to go to the Embassy to straighten that mess out." The 9th MAB commander learned later that at approximately the same time he was having his discussion with Admiral Whitmire, Lieutenant General Louis H. Wilson, Jr., FMF Pacific commander, was addressing the same problem (halt in flight operations) in the CinCPac command center where he spent the evening of 28-29 April (Hawaii time) with Admiral Gayler, CinCPac.⁵⁵

The command center had a landline hookup with Admiral Steele's immediate commander, Admiral Maurice F. Weisner (CinCPacFlt), located down the street in Pearl Harbor, and radio communications with Admiral Steele, the Seventh Fleet commander. It was from Admiral Steele that General Wilson learned that flight operations had been terminated for administrative restrictions on the maximum number of flight hours allowed in one 24-hour period. General Wil-

Evacuees ride a Marine CH-53 to another ship in the formation. Because of the tempo of operations and the number of refugees, most of them had to be repositioned from a tactical ship to a non-tactical vessel.

Photo courtesy of Capt Russell R. Thurman, USMC (Ret)



*The post-operational JCS investigation, conducted to determine why L-Hour was postponed and why there was a two-hour gap in flight operations (from 0100 to 0300 Saigon time on 30 April), confirmed that Admiral Whitmire made an independent decision to halt flight operations. The report stated: "Following the extraction of the GSF from the DAO Compound at 1612Z [0012 Saigon time] all H-53 helicopters were directed by CTF 76 to return to base for aircraft servicing and crew rest. Although instructions were given to continue evacuation of the Embassy with CH-46s, CTF 76 decided it was necessary to shut down for required maintenance checks which took the better part of an hour to complete." Cleland Report.



Photo courtesy of Capt Russell R. Thurman, USMC (Ret)

Last members of the ground security force arrive on board the Okinawa after midnight on 30 April. BLT 2/4 Marines provided perimeter security at the DAO until the bitter end.

son said, "I learned from the Seventh Fleet commander that the Marines had flown their maximum number of hours and therefore he was stopping flight operations." Upon receiving this word which essentially meant that the Marines in Saigon would not be recovered, at least until first light, General Wilson took immediate action. He informed Admirals Gayler and Weisner that he would prefer charges against any officer who ordered his Marine pilots to stop flying so long as there were Marines still on the ground in Saigon. General Wilson recalled, "If General Carey was damn angry, I was out of my mind. I told Admiral Gayler and Admiral Weisner on the phone, that there was no such thing as Marines not evacuating Marines. We do not understand that."⁵⁶

The Air Force, also over their crew day (i.e. having flown in excess of the 12 hours allowed in one day), did not resume the airlift. Their eight CH-53s and two HH-53s shut down after the final sortie from the DAO Compound and did not launch again. The resumption of flight operations caught many of the Marine CH-53 pilots by surprise. As Lieutenant Colonel Bolton said, "I was on my way to my quarters

when I received word to standby for the possible launch of my squadron's aircraft."⁵⁷

By 0215, one CH-46 and one CH-53 were landing at the Embassy every 10 minutes. The Embassy at this point indicated that 19 more lifts would complete the evacuation.* As this number approached, General Carey notified Captain Gerald L. "Gerry" Berry, a HMM-165 pilot, that his CH-46 would extract Ambassador Martin. His instructions included the order to remain atop the Embassy building as long as necessary to load him. At 0458 on 30 April 1975 Captain Berry, in "Lady Ace 09," departed the Embassy helipad,

*Admiral Steele offered his recollections of the nearly endless supply of evacuees at the Embassy: "One thing not generally known is that Ambassador Martin was attempting to get large numbers of Vietnamese evacuated from the Embassy. It appeared to be a bottomless pit, and as our men and machines began to tire I began pressuring the Embassy to get all Americans and the Ambassador out. I did not want him captured. The number three man in the Embassy arrived on board the *Blue Ridge* and reported the Ambassador to be ill and exhausted. Through loyalty to our Vietnamese colleagues, he was going to keep that evacuation going indefinitely, and in my opinion, force it to keep going by not coming out himself." Steele Comments.

and Ambassador Martin bid farewell to South Vietnam. The American Embassy had officially closed its doors. Unofficially, a handful of American Marines still remained at the Embassy, waiting for their ride to freedom.⁵⁸

Actually, the Ambassador's departure reflected more than the completion of the 19 lifts predicted necessary to finish the evacuation. It represented the results of a presidential order to Ambassador Martin, passed via a Marine CH-53 flown by Captain Jon M. Walters. At 0327, President Ford ordered that no more than 19 additional lifts would be flown and that Ambassador Martin would be on the last one. At 0430, General Carey received word that the 19-lift limit had been exceeded and he immediately relayed to his aircraft commanders, via the ABCCC, the order to extract all remaining Americans, and directed the Marine security force to take up positions on the rooftop, awaiting evacuation.⁵⁹

After Berry's helicopter departed, the only thing that remained was to extract the Marines still guarding the Embassy. Major James H. Kean, the Officer-in-Charge of the Marine Security Guard, had with him a small contingent of Embassy and 9th MAB Marines. Within the next hour this force shrank to 11 Marines.

Upon Ambassador Martin's departure, Major Kean moved his Marines inside the embassy, barricaded the doors, and then moved up through the building until they occupied only the top floor. From this location, he had easy access to the helo landing pad.

Dodging small arms fire and using riot control agents against people attempting to force their way to the rooftop, he and his 10 Marines boarded "Swift 2-2," a HMM-164 CH-46, the last American helicopter to leave South Vietnam. Checking his watch, Major Kean noted that it was seven minutes until eight, only 23 hours since the NCOIC of Marine Security Guard, Manila, had called him to relay a message from his wife in Hong Kong that she was pregnant. Only 32 minutes later on that unforgettable day, 30 April 1975, the 11 Marines exited "Swift 2-2" onto the deck of the *Okinawa* where Gunnery Sergeant Russell R. Thurman captured their weary faces on camera. Disembarking, many on board the *Okinawa*, Gunnery Sergeant Thurman included, wondered why so much time had elapsed between the arrival of the Ambassador's flight and Swift 2-2, well over two hours. Had someone forgotten these Marines were still at the Embassy? The answer is no. The intention was to remove the Ambassador while some security still remained at the Embassy, and then have other helicopters pick up the remaining Marines, but it appears that when Captain Berry's aircraft transmitted "Tiger is out," those helicopters still flying, including Captain Walters who was orbiting the Embassy at the time the Ambassador left, thought the mission was complete. This particular transmission had been the preplanned code to indicate when the Ambassador was on board a helicopter outbound to the task force. Having waited so long for his departure, this transmission caused some to conclude that he had departed as part of the last group

A CH-53 departs LZ 39 after depositing its security force. After the withdrawal of the last ground forces at 0030, 30 April, flight operations ceased for nearly two hours.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A150962



to leave the Embassy. Captain Berry later explained that radio message: “‘Tiger—Tiger—Tiger’ was the call to be made when the Ambassador was on board and on his way out of Saigon. It had absolutely nothing to do with the cessation of the operation. We had originally planned to bring the Ambassador out on the afternoon of the 29th.”⁶⁰

At this juncture, thinking the mission complete and the Ambassador safe, Captain Walters headed back to the *Okinawa*. Subsequent to his landing at approximately 0700, the command realized that Captain Walters did not have the remaining Marines on board.* Due to a misunderstanding and miscommunication, they were still at the Embassy. General Carey immediately recycled a CH-46, but by this time due to the ships' offshore movement, the time required to reach the Embassy exceeded 40 minutes.⁶¹

To the Marines waiting in Saigon, attempts by the South Vietnamese to reach the roof kept them busy and as a consequence, they did not notice the extended gap between the flights. Major Kean later stated that he and his Marines did not become alarmed because they knew that another CH-46 would arrive: “We never had a doubt that our fellow Marines would return and pick us up. They had been doing it all night long.”⁶²

For the immense size and complexity of this operation, there were few mistakes. Besides the nearly 5,000 people evacuated from the DAO compound, 978 U.S. and 1,120 third-country nationals were lifted from the Embassy.⁶³ Despite numerous phone calls and extensive efforts to ensure that all Americans, even deceased ones, were extracted, the bodies of Corporal McMahon and Lance Corporal Judge were left behind. Inexplicably, they had been left at the Seventh Day Adventist Hospital, nearby Tan Son Nhut. (In phone calls to the hospital on the afternoon of 29 April, the few remaining members of its staff reported that the deceased Marines' bodies had already been delivered

to the task force. Senator Edward M. Kennedy of Massachusetts through diplomatic channels recovered them the following year.)⁶⁴ In addition, the Marine Corps suffered the loss of two aircraft. One of the two was an AH-1J Cobra, whose pilots, Captain John W. Bowman, Jr., and First Lieutenant David L. Androskaut, successfully made a night water ditching after the Cobra's engines flamed out from fuel starvation. Shortly after overflying the USS *Kirk* (DE 1087) while in search of the *Okinawa*, Captain Bowman noted that his altimeter read 900 feet and his fuel gauge 200 pounds. In the next instant, he found himself groping with an emergency autorotation to a dark, empty sea. Many agonizing moments after impact, Captain Bowman finally managed to unfasten his seat belt on the third attempt while his sinking helicopter filled with water. He recalled, “As I exited the helicopter in the dark, I had no idea which way was up, but I remembered that the helicopter must be sinking toward the bottom, so I swam in the opposite direction and just when I was about to doubt my decision, a sliver of moonlight bounced off the dangling legs of my co-pilot, suspended just above my head.”⁶⁵ Soon after Bowman and his copilot linked up, a boat, launched from the *Kirk* after its officer of the day heard the helicopter's engines quit, picked them up.

The other aircraft's pilots were not as fortunate. A CH-46F from the *Hancock* flown by Captain William C. Nystul and First Lieutenant Michael J. Shea crashed into the sea on its approach to the ship after having flown a long and exhausting night sea and air rescue mission (SAR). Amazingly, the two enlisted crewmembers survived, but the bodies of the pilots were not recovered. The cause of the crash was never determined, but crew inexperience and unfamiliarity with the mission may have been factors.** Normally, ships carrying helicopters do not use a SAR helicopter. Instead they assume that all airborne helicopters are potential SAR aircraft during helicopter flight operations. The *Hancock*, accustomed to fixed-wing flight operations where an airborne SAR helicopter is mandatory, did not modify its procedures. However for an operation of this size, a designated rescue helicopter provided the task force with the capability of respond-

*Captain Berry recalled the incident somewhat differently. He stated, “When Lady Ace 09 brought the Ambassador out there were only two CH-46s still flying (Lady Ace 09 and wingman). This was because there was much confusion over flight time. When I landed on board the *Blue Ridge* and informed General Carey of the lack of aircraft he took immediate action with HDC on board the *Okinawa*—Lady Ace 09 and flight then returned to the Embassy and extracted most of the remaining Marines—as we were departing Swift 2-2 was approaching the Embassy for the final pick-up. The reason for the long delay between the Ambassador and the Marine pick-up is easy to figure out—only two aircraft flying from the 28 CH-46s and 30 plus CH-53s (CH-53s could not land on the roof.)” Berry Comments.

**Captain Berry recently related the flying backgrounds of this crew. He said, “Captain Nystul had just returned from Pensacola fixed-wing instructor duty and had about 20 hours of refamiliarization in the '46.' His co-pilot was First Lieutenant Shea, a CH-53 pilot, who had gotten approximately 25 CH-46 hours with us in Futema before deploying.” Berry Comments.



Photos courtesy of Capt Russell R. Thurman, USMC (Ret)

Five of the last 11 Marines to leave South Vietnam arrive on board the USS Okinawa prior to 0830 on 30 April. Seen exiting the helicopter are Sgt Terry J. Bennington followed by Cpl Stephen Q. Bauer (above); Sgt Philip A. Babel (above right); and SSgt Michael K. Sullivan and Sgt Steven T. Schuller (at right).

ing instantly to any airborne emergency and thus extended its options.⁶⁶

Despite these losses, Operation Frequent Wind accomplished its purpose, the safe evacuation of American, Vietnamese, and third-country citizens from South Vietnam. It stands as the largest helicopter evacuation in history*. For the Marine Corps it meant 1,054 flight hours and 682 sorties, 34 of which be-



*Major General Norman W. Gourley, commanding general of the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing, later recounted his assessment of the operation. "I spent 36 years in the Marine Corps; fought WW II in Corsairs; the Korean War as a night fighter pilot flying F-7Fs and F-3Ds; and the Vietnam War flying F-4 Phantoms. I have seen and heard of combat air operations which required all the talent, guts, and nerve available. Never in the annals of flying, and I am including all U.S. combat air operations of any war, have a group of pilots performed so magnificently as the helicopter pilots who extracted those folks out of Saigon in late April, 1975. The term 'distinguished flying' fits each and every one. These young helicopter tigers did it all—long hours in the cockpit, night operations, terrible visibility and weather, being shot at—the bottom line being 'mission completed,' they did their job. It is indeed unfortunate that more recognition was not forthcoming to this group of Marine aviators." Gourley Comments. Colonel Edward Pelosky, USA, a member of the DAO staff evacuated to the *Vancouver*, offered his appraisal of the operation: "My hat is off to those individual planners and participants who got us out of Saigon. It was a deliberate exercise pulled off with precision, confidence, and the great skill of the aviators—a textbook version." Pelosky Comments.

longed to Captain Gerry Berry. He logged the most hours, 18.3, in a 20 hour period, which reflected the operation's intensity and complexity. For its effort, HMH-463 received the Marine Corps Aviation Association's (MCAA) General Keith B. McCutcheon Award as the 1975 Helicopter Squadron of the Year. In addition, the MCAA chose Lieutenant Colonel James L. Bolton (HMH-462's commanding officer) as the 1975 Aviator of the Year and recipient of the Alfred A. Cunningham Award. Captain John B. Heffernan, one of Bolton's pilots, recently recalled his thoughts at the conclusion of the operation: "I will never forget one minute of this incredible flying experience. I was lucky to be here." Surely, the 1,373 Americans and 5,595 non-American evacuees agreed that they too were lucky to be there, on American ships.⁶⁷



Photo courtesy of Capt Russell R. Thurman, USMC (Ret)

Two Marine pilots were rescued from the sea at night after their Cobra crashed. Capt John W. Bowman, Jr., right, piloted the AH-1J, and 1stLt David L. Androskaut was co-pilot.

CHAPTER 12

Refugee Operations

*A Link to Freedom: The Exodus and a New Beginning—Way Stations—Preparations: 1st Battalion, 4th Marines and the Task Force—Evacuation and Passage: Frequent Wind and the AESF's Final Chapter
A Vietnamese City in Guam—The Final Link: Camp Pendleton*

“Operation New Arrivals will commence Phasedown incrementally when directed about 15 September (75). As presently planned, refugees at Camp Pendleton, California will be reduced to approximately 6800 on or about 30 September 1975.”¹ With those words Brigadier General Paul G. Graham published his final order in the final chapter of the Marine Corps’ official involvement in the South Vietnamese refugee operation. He concluded this assignment by submitting an after action report to the Commandant of the Marine Corps in November 1975. It marked the completion of more than six months of refugee operations for the Marine Corps which began in March with Staff Sergeant Walter W. Sparks and his detachment assisting evacuees in Da Nang Harbor. Those 200 days consumed the lion’s share of the daily lives of the Marines participating in the rescue and resettlement of Vietnamese refugees.

Sandwiched between the initial security force (the Amphibious Evacuation RVN Support Group) and General Graham’s Refugee Receiving Center were the efforts of the Marine Security Guard Detachments in South Vietnam; the Amphibious Evacuation Security Force; 1st Battalion, 4th Marines; Marine Barracks Guam; MCAS El Toro; and Marines from various commands, primarily units located on the West Coast. Highly publicized, very visible, and extremely sensitive, this undertaking represented an event as complex, complicated, and expensive as a major battle, and in essence had many of the trappings of warfare. To say it was disruptive and changed America belies the magnitude of the event. The refugee story, especially the story of their resettlement, is the Vietnam War’s living legacy. In effect, it symbolized the Marine Corps’ final Vietnam battle; the bitter end to a bitter struggle, but as in the case of a bitter end of a rope, that same end can also be a beginning, a rescue line, and a link to freedom.

A Link to Freedom: The Exodus and a New Beginning

Admiral Steele’s Seventh Fleet, including Admiral Whitmire’s Task Force 76 and General Carey’s 9th MAB, extracted more than 7,000 fleeing South Vietnamese, providing them a new beginning. In addition,

Colonel Frank G. McLendon’s Provisional Marine Aircraft Group 39’s helicopters removed 395 U.S. citizens and 4,475 refugees from the DAO compound and 978 Americans and 1,120 evacuees from the American Embassy.* These numbers did not include the American security force or Embassy Marines. Using 34 CH-53s, 29 CH-46s, 8 AH-1Js, and 6 UH-1Es, the ProvMAG flew 682 sorties (360 at night) and 560 hours [CH-53, 314; CH-46, 206; AH-1J, 34; UH-1E, 6], while the 10 Military Sealift Command ships continued, along with some 45 Navy ships, to pick up refugees escaping from Vietnam in everything from helicopters to sampans. The count for this four-day period put the total at over 40,000 evacuated with a final estimate for the month of April of approximately 130,000.²

In applauding the success of this mission, the Commander-in-Chief, Pacific, Admiral Noel Gayler, said, “This was a tough one. The job was uncertain, unprecedented, dangerous beyond measure. It demanded the last ounce of endurance and fortitude and savvy, and you gave it that and more . . . The rescue was a tremendous and joint enterprise, under the most difficult conditions. Performance of all hands superb. Well Done.”³

A successful rescue does not always mean a happy ending. Those rescued on 30 April and the thousands of others who left South Vietnam during April had to first reach safe haven before they could even think about freedom. The first link in this chain to freedom, the rescue, had to be joined to the next link, passage. For the majority of the Vietnamese evacuees, who had

*Evacuation numbers vary somewhat from those depicted by the 9th MAB Command Chronology. ProvMAG-39 reported: “Later in the day evacuation began at the U.S. Embassy. An estimated 1150 American citizens and over 6,000 Vietnamese and Third Country Nationals were evacuated.” ProvMAG-39 ComdC. The JCS investigation of Operation Frequent Wind stated: “At approximately 1700, the evacuation of the U.S. Embassy began. During the period 18 CH-53 and 54 CH-46 sorties evacuated 2379 passengers of which 978 were U.S. citizens, 1228 were foreign nationals and 173 USMC personnel.” In addition it provided slightly different figures for the DAO: “A total of 122 sorties were flown during the evacuation of the DAO with 6416 passengers lifted from that location. This total includes 395 U.S. citizens, 5205 foreign nationals, and 816 GSF personnel.” Cleland Report.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 7717775

Capt Robert D. Amos, Jr., commander of Detachment Tango (HqBn, 3d MarDiv), AESF, offers assistance to a Vietnamese Navy dependent as she boards the SS Green Forest.

been at sea for several days, survival had become their sole concern. Water, sustenance, and survival were less pressing matters for the South Vietnamese citizens evacuated by helicopter, but they represented only 10 percent of the 26-30 April refugee flotilla, later called "boat people." To them the ships of Task Force 76 represented a haven of hope and safety, and above all else a ticket to freedom. For those Vietnamese who had been evacuated earlier in April and by 30 April were already in Guam or the Philippines the means of exodus may have been different, but the results would be the same; most South Vietnamese evacuees' final stop would be a processing center stateside awaiting sponsorship by an American family or organization.

Many of the "boat people" as well as all of the refugees in the 29-30 April air evacuation ended their initial journey from South Vietnam on an American naval vessel. In order to place these refugees with those forces best prepared to handle them, the Navy transferred the majority of them to MSC ships. Purposely kept empty just prior to the beginning of Frequent Wind, these ships stood ready to receive the maximum number of evacuees. In fact, a post operation sum-

mary of MSC shipping revealed that just prior to the start of the major evacuation of Saigon, eight of the 12 MSC ships were empty while waiting with Task Force 76 ships in international waters off the coast of South Vietnam. The only other empty ship, the *Green Forest*, awaited its human cargo while at anchor off Con Son Island. On the evening of 30 April, the deluge began. Thousands of desperate South Vietnamese engulfed the MSC ships. To the Amphibious Evacuation Security Force Marines guarding these ships, the waves of approaching refugees meant the waiting was over. Their job had begun.

On 30 April, Major Quinlan, the Amphibious Evacuation Security Force commander, would report the following distribution of forces: Detachment Fox-trot and Captain Richard R. Page on the USNS *Green-ville Victory*; Detachment India and Captain Cyril V. Moyher on *Pioneer Commander*; Detachment November and Captain Michael T. Mallick on the SS *American Challenger*; Detachment Papa and Captain Richard M. Jessie, Jr., on the SS *Green Port*; Detachment Sierra and Captain Edward R. Palmquist, Jr., on the USNS *Sergeant Andrew Miller*; Detachment Tango

and Captain Robert D. Amos, Jr., on the *Green Forest*; Detachment Victor and Captain David A. Garcia on the *Pioneer Contender*; and Detachment Echo and Captain Richard L. Reuter on the USNS *Sergeant Truman Kimbro* (she already had 150 Vietnamese on board, delivered by a Navy ship on the 29th).⁴ Within 24 hours, these largely empty ships would be en route to Subic Bay with 39,824 refugees embarked. Within the next few days, the SS *Transcolorado* and the *American Racer* began embarking refugees. Initially without Marines, each ship, upon arrival in Subic, received a complement of security forces. Detachment Hotel and Captain William H. Hackett, Jr., transferred from the *Dubuque* on 4 May to the *Transcolorado*, and the next day, Detachment Mike and First Lieutenant Carl W. Fredericksen left the *Dubuque* and embarked in the *American Racer*. Another ship involved in the care and especially the feeding of the evacuees was the SS *Green Wave*, a cargo ship. At 0800 on 5 May, Detachment Uniform and Captain Steven A. Shepherd joined the *Green Wave*. Once loaded to capacity with refugees and with its Marines

fully prepared for their security role, these three ships (*Transcolorado*, *American Racer*, and *Green Wave*) left Subic, bound for Guam.

One of the reasons for such a quick transfer of refugees and Marines in Subic was due to Filipino sensitivity and the arrival of a flotilla of Vietnamese Navy vessels fully loaded with thousands of refugees. Literally, there was no more room in Subic for them, and diplomatically, the Philippines Government had no more time for unprocessed aliens. During the period from 21-28 April, the United States had evacuated by airplane 42,910 people. Although the 170 Air Force C-130 and 134 C-141 sorties took some of these refugees to Guam, the majority landed and disembarked at Clark Air Force Base. The numbers of undocumented and therefore illegal immigrants so alarmed President Ferdinand Marcos (the U.S. had promised him that all transiting South Vietnamese would have passports and required documentation) that the Philippines Government informed the American Embassy in Manila that refugees could not remain in the Philippines any longer than 72 hours and that no armed

Capt Edward R. Palmquist, Jr., commander of Detachment Sierra, shouts to his men on the USNS Sergeant Andrew Miller. Within 24 hours MSC ships loaded nearly 40,000 refugees.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 7714875

