

Map adapted from Gen Cao Van Vien, *The Final Collapse* (Washington: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1983)

mayor of Vung Tau, a newspaper owner, professors, and college students. The group had paid 50 million piasters for the boat and intended to sail to Singapore and sell the boat there." After berthing this group of evacuees, Detachment Echo began an around-the-clock routine which did not cease until it finally discharged its passengers. Within 24 hours of Echo Detachment's introduction to refugee-related functions, every AESF detachment was inundated with evacuees. The delay had been supplanted by non-stop activity.¹⁴

Xuan Loc Remembered

The mid-April decision to reorganize the brigade and activate the AESF occurred during a 48-hour lull in the battle for Xuan Loc. Described in many newspaper reports as the "killing ground," this deadly battle entered its second week on Wednesday, 16 April, as both sides fought for what each had deemed critically necessary objectives. The ferocity of the fighting reflected the need by the ARVN for a battlefield victory and the NVA obsession with the capture of Saigon before the end of April.

With authorization from Hanoi to delay the final offensive for a week to allow his supply lines and other units to catch up, General Dung chose to modify his plan and bypass the Long Khanh provincial capital. Instead of continuing frontal assaults, he decided to neutralize Xuan Loc by outflanking the city's defenses, attacking only the perimeter. He planned to leave elements of three units (*341st, 6th, and 7th NVA Divisions*) behind while moving the majority of his forces westward, thereby resuming the offensive against Bien Hoa and Saigon. According to Dung: "We advised that once the enemy amassed troops to save Xuan Loc, we need not concentrate our forces and continue attacking them head on. We would shift our forces to strike counterattacking units in the outer perimeter, where they had insufficient defense works and were not in close coordination with each other . . ." ¹⁵

After the short respite, the NVA pursued its new strategy and on 17 April, after several unsuccessful assaults, it overran the 48th Regiment of the 18th ARVN Division which had been guarding the western edge of the city. With the earlier loss of the 52nd Regiment, which had been defending the intersection of Highways 1 and 20; the diminishing number of resupply and evacuation helicopters; and the collapse of the city's western flank, the 18th ARVN Division and the 1st Airborne Brigade faced encirclement.

To avoid losing these forces, the JGS authorized III Corps to order Brigadier General Le Minh Dao, the division commander, to evacuate Xuan Loc. On the evening of 20 April, the 18th ARVN Division, 1st Airborne Brigade, and Regional and Popular Force elements conducted a successful withdrawal from Xuan Loc, retreating south toward Ba Ria, along Interprovincial Route 2. Overshadowing the military consequences of this withdrawal were the political consequences.

The following day, President Thieu resigned and, accompanied by his family, flew to Taiwan.* Vice President Tran Van Huong, the president's constitutional successor, replaced Thieu. His term lasted a week. On 27 April, with Saigon surrounded by Dung's forces (*232d Tactical Force* interdicting Highway 4 on the Long An Front; *3d NVA Corps* dominating Route 1 on the Cu Chi Front; *1st NVA Corps* controlling Highway 13 on the Binh Duong Front; *2d NVA Corps* dominating the QL-15 Front and targeting Long Thanh and Ba Ria; and the *4th NVA Corps* on the main axis of attack controlling the eastern approach to Saigon, the Bien Hoa Front), the National Assembly designated General Duong Van "Big" Minh to replace Tran Van Huong as President of the Republic of Vietnam.¹⁶

On the evening of 28 April, with Saigon nearly surrounded, General Minh took the oath of office. If he harbored any doubts about whether or not Saigon and its beleaguered ARVN defenders could protect the city from the impending Communist onslaught, the sound of exploding bombs quickly removed them. For within minutes of the ceremony, a flight of captured South Vietnamese A-37s bombed Tan Son Nhut. This attack and an early morning rocket attack, which had occurred the day before, marked the first time in five years that the citizens of Saigon had experienced enemy hostilities. The sudden conclusion to the city's five-year "peace" convinced the new leaders of the republic that they had but two choices: negotiate or capitulate.¹⁷

*Plagued by repeated calls to resign, President Thieu had continued to refuse to turn over the government and had become a most unpopular leader. Since his decision in March to withdraw the Airborne Brigade from MR 1, his political support had evaporated. The most visible manifestation of Thieu's fall from favor occurred on 8 April when a disgruntled VNAF F-5 pilot, Lieutenant Nguyen Thanh Trung, attacked the presidential residence, dropping two of his four bombs. This F-5 pilot would subsequently train a handful of NVA pilots to fly A-37s the NVA had captured earlier in the war. In late April those same Communists led an aerial attack on Saigon. *Fall of the South* and *Spring Victory*.

Before dawn on the next day, at 0358, the Communists launched another rocket attack. They directed this one at Tan Son Nhut, sending a reminder to General Minh that they had no intentions of negotiating a settlement. The deadly rocket barrage marked the beginning of the final offensive. Two of the first rockets slammed into a checkpoint just outside the DAO's main gate, killing instantly the two Marines manning it. Corporal Charles McMahon, Jr., of Woburn, Massachusetts, and Lance Corporal Darwin D. Judge of Marshalltown, Iowa, became the first two casualties of Operation Frequent Wind and the last two Marines to die on the ground in South Vietnam. At the airfield itself, confusion reigned as three Air Force C-130s, part of the just resumed fixed-wing evacuation, attempted to depart Tan Son Nhut and escape the enemy fire. General Smith temporarily halted the evacuation and called the Ambassador.¹⁸

Shortly after the attack, many South Vietnamese pilots, following orders from their superiors, departed Tan Son Nhut for safe haven in Thailand. Leaving the airfield in haste, a number of them jettisoned bombs and external fuel tanks on the runway. With the airfield littered with debris and abandoned equipment and aircraft threatened by roving bands of ARVN

soldiers. General Smith encouraged Ambassador Martin to cancel the fixed-wing evacuation scheduled for that day. The Ambassador then made a personal visit to General Smith's headquarters to assess the damage. General Smith recently recalled that meeting: "Ambassador Martin actually came out to my headquarters and received a briefing from the USAF officers who had come over from the airfield. It was after this briefing that he decided to fall off his position to continue the fixed-wing evacuation and so he informed the Secretary of State from my headquarters immediately thereafter. This set in motion officially the rotary-wing evacuation."¹⁹

After his meeting with General Smith, Ambassador Martin returned to the Embassy and made his decision. When the Ambassador picked up the secure phone in his office and called Secretary of State Kissinger, he officially relinquished control of the evacuation of South Vietnam. In less than 20 minutes, it became a military operation. At 1051 29 April 1975, USSAG passed the word to execute Frequent Wind's Option IV.²⁰

Sun Tzu, the great Chinese warrior and philosopher, had preached to his military disciples: "The worst policy is to attack cities. Attack cities when there

VNAF C-130 burns from hit by NVA rocket on 29 April. The assault forced Ambassador Martin to halt, then cancel, fixed-wing evacuation and take Frequent Wind Option IV.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC)A150966





Marine Corps Historical Collection
Maj James E. Livingston, seen here as a brigadier general, served as operations officer for Col Alfred M. Gray's RLT-4. Maj Livingston spent many hours at the DAO refining the regiment's scheme of maneuver.

is no alternative." General Dung proved to be a good disciple. The NVA never attacked the city of Saigon because less than 24 hours after USSAG sent the execute message, the president of South Vietnam, General Minh, told his soldiers to lay down their arms. On 30 April 1975, the Republic of Vietnam ceased to exist.²¹

Saigon and the Final Preparation Pieces

As the final events leading up to the collapse unfolded, Colonel Taylor and his Advance Command Element (9th MAB forward headquarters) attempted to integrate their efforts into those of the DAO's Special Planning Group. Beginning their work the same day the 18th ARVN Division left Xuan Loc, every member of the team knew they had only a little time left in which to prepare for the final evacuation. They were aided in their efforts by various members of the 9th MAB, RLT 4, ProvMAG-39, and BLSG staffs. Individuals from these headquarters shuttled between the task force and the DAO almost daily, serving as an important link between the *Blue Ridge* and the 9th MAB forward headquarters. As a result of these liaison visits, Major John A. Murray, the RLT S-4, was able to develop a very sophisticated air plan while the operations officer, Major James E. Livingston, fine-tuned Colonel Alfred M. Gray's plan for RLT 4 to secure the DAO Compound for evacuation. This team

Members of 1stLt Bruce P. Thompson-Bowers' platoon arrive at the DAO, Saigon. The 3d Platoon of Company C, BLT 1/9 departed the Okinawa in civilian clothes to avoid an overt breach of the Paris Accords, despite the imminent collapse of the Saigon Government.

Marine Corps Historical Collection



effort greatly enhanced the DAO's careful preparations and underscored the difficulty and the value of the 9th MAB's reorganization. As Major Livingston later recalled, "One of the key lessons that evolved from Operation Frequent Wind was the concept of compositing. This process was accomplished while all units (three MAUs) were at sea. Numerous liaison trips by personnel aboard the *Blue Ridge* using Air America helicopters resolved issues" that arose between the reconfigured 9th MAB and the other commands. A force had been composed at sea to handle the impending emergency on land, and the ensuing liaison made everyone aware of its capabilities, its limitations, and the criticality of good communications.²²

With command arrangements in Saigon complicated and Ambassador Graham Martin attempting to maintain a professional facade at the Embassy of "business as usual," these visits took on added weight. The need to give the appearance that America was not quitting and running from South Vietnam meant that visitors to Saigon had to keep a low profile during the day. The night, however, belonged to the 9th MAB, its forward headquarters, and the DAO's evacuation planners.

There was one exception to this rule, the DAO. By 21 April evacuation flights were departing every half-hour fully loaded. Each evening as the National Police enforced the curfew and closed the city, the arrival of new evacuees ceased and with the normal lag effect, it usually did not resume until 1000 the next day. To ensure that there were always enough passengers to process and fill the precious spaces that left Tan Son Nhut, the evacuation processing center and Lieutenant Colonel McKinstry had to keep between 200 and 600 South Vietnamese in the compound every night. As the numbers increased, sanitation and security became problems. Even though the crowds were, as McKinstry said, "well-behaved and friendly," they roamed the installation essentially uncontrolled because, by this time, the DAO was seriously undermanned. On 21 April the DAO sent a message to Washington requesting permission to insert a platoon of Marines into the DAO. Four days later, Air America helicopters transported a platoon of Marines, dressed in civilian clothes and carrying their combat gear, from the *Hancock* to Tan Son Nhut.* Just before noon that Friday, 25 April, First Lieutenant Bruce P. Thompson-Bowers and the 3d Platoon of Company C, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines

became the DAO's security force, joining Colonel Taylor and the Advance Command Element as augmenting members of the "Pentagon East."²³

Arriving at the compound the day the DAO requested additional security, the Advance Command Element immediately recognized that a great deal of preparation had already been accomplished, but efforts to make the area suitable for helicopter operations had barely started. By late evening on 21 April, the 9th MAB forward headquarters had inspected all of the proposed landing zones. Engineering efforts to improve the zones began immediately and, within days, Colonel Taylor's group had clearly marked all of the LZs. These activities, including the placing of wind socks and luminescent markings on 13 preselected rooftops designated as American evacuee assembly points, were always conducted between sunset and sunrise to avoid panicking the citizens of Saigon. At the DAO compound, itself, the SPG and the 9th MAB Marines made the necessary improvements to enable an initial wave of 12 CH-53s to land. Throughout the slow and seemingly tedious landing zone repair period, the 9th MAB, RLT 4, and ProvMag staffs all visited the DAO compound. They inspected the progress and reported the results to their respective commanders.²³

On Monday morning, 21 April, Lieutenant Colonel Donald J. "Duffy" Verdon, the Advance Command Element's communications officer, began his first full day at the DAO by obtaining a comprehensive briefing on the compound's communications facilities. After a physical inspection of the assets of the Evacuation Control Center, he decided that the existing equipment, with some minor additions—mainly one receiver-transmitter and the placement of an antenna on the compound's water tank, would suffice. The 9th MAB immediately transferred his additional requirements, including a contingent of support personnel and their equipment, to the DAO. The introduction of troops and equipment continued (final count, 18) until the DAO's communications facilities could simultaneously sustain three landing zone control parties. Specifically, each party could communicate from each zone on high, very high, and ultra-high frequency. Almost on a daily basis during the 9th MAB forward headquarter's stay in the "Alamo," the communications-electronics officer, the 9th MAB communications officer, and his counterpart in RLT 4, all visited the Compound and exchanged ideas and information in order to achieve the highest state of communications readiness.²⁵

On 25 April, the Advance Command Element air

*Once inside the confines of the DAO, these Marines donned their gear and assumed their security duties.

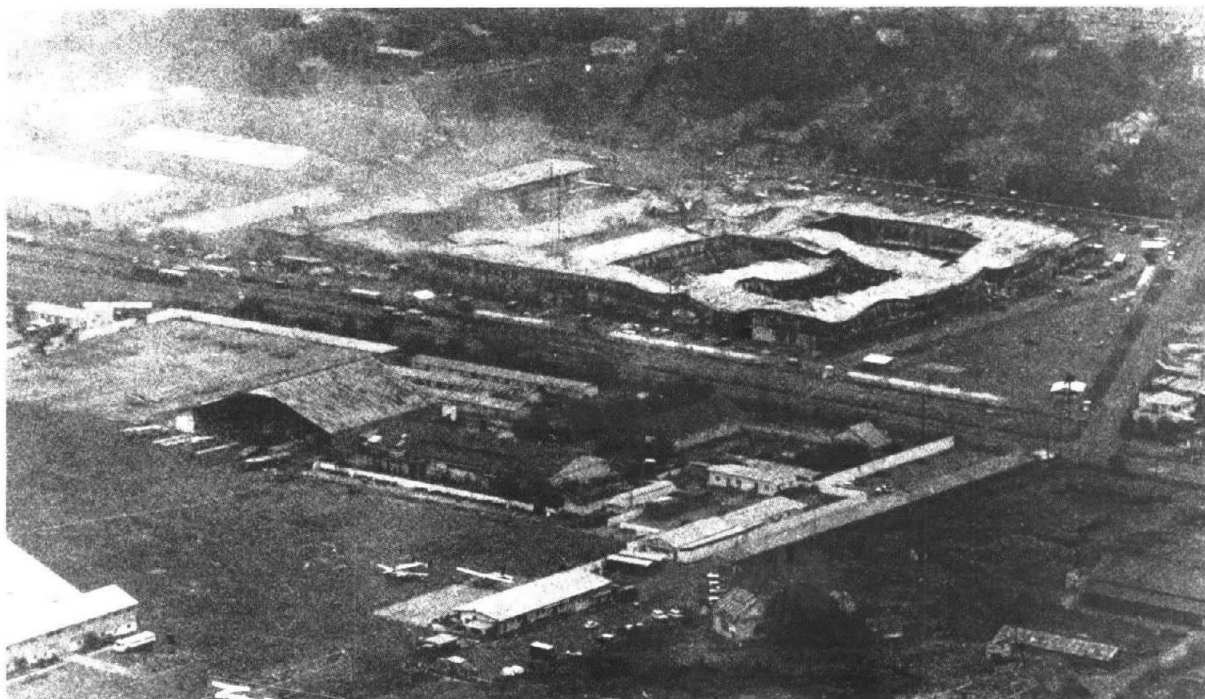


Photo courtesy of Capt Anthony A. Wood, USMC (Ret)

The Defense Attache Office, Saigon, on 30 April 1975, shows the effects of 9th MAB's thermite charges. Thanks to the efforts of Capt McManus and MSgt East, the one-time U.S. headquarters, made of concrete and reinforced steel, has literally melted and shrunk.

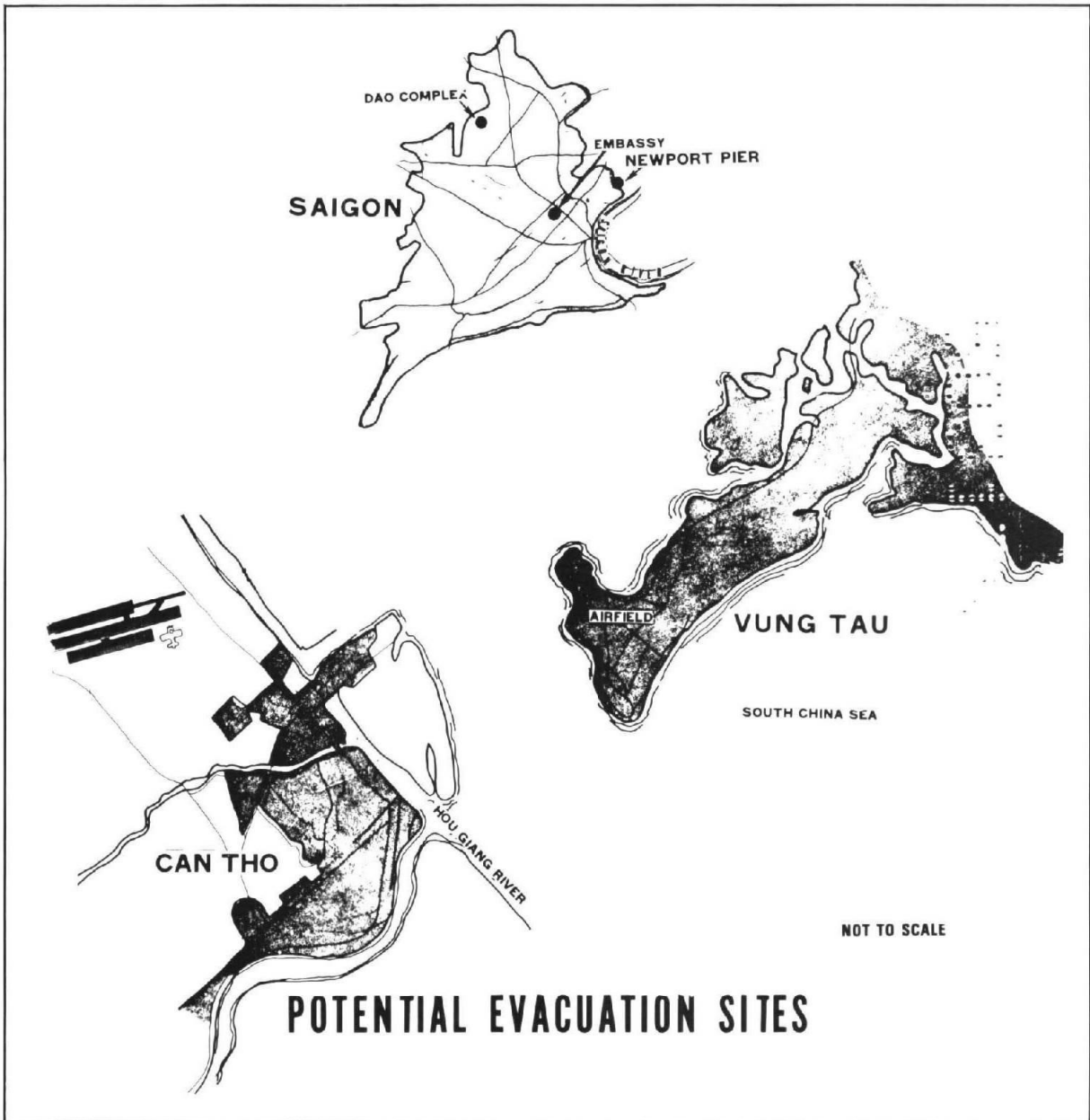
liaison officer, Major David E. Cox, conducted a readiness briefing for the commanding general of the 9th MAB, his principal staff, the RLT 4 staff, and the staff of ProvMAG-39. Included in the meeting on board the *Blue Ridge* was a 35mm slide presentation of the DAO landing zones, obstacles to flight, aerial checkpoints, and the ingress/egress route from the task force to Saigon. At the conclusion of the session, General Carey gave Major Cox a copy of the plan for the employment of the landing force at the DAO/Air America complex. Major Cox then departed for Saigon where he conveyed those intentions to the Defense Attache, General Smith. During his meeting with the Defense Attache, Major Cox highlighted General Carey's plans for helicopter operations, landing zone organization, and evacuee processing.²⁶

On that same day, the landing zones were declared ready for use. Each zone bore distinctive markings colored with luminescent paint and known as CH-53 "footprints." Taken from the CH-53 NATOPS Flight Manual, they were placed to provide maximum rotor tip clearance. In cases where the zone could not be painted, iron rods were installed. Sometime just prior to L-hour, members of the Advance Command Element would attach standard Marine Corps marking

panels to the rods. Communications remained the only unfinished major area as Lieutenant Colonel Verdon continued his preparations. During this period, he also provided technical assistance and support to the Special Planning Group, responsible for controlling the surface evacuation of Saigon.²⁷

In all respects, Colonel Taylor's team of experts supported by their counterparts on the 9th MAB and RLT 4 staffs greatly aided and enhanced the Special Planning Group in its last-minute preparations. Their presence eased some of the strain of an undermanned DAO staff attempting to conduct a massive fixed-wing evacuation while its own numbers decreased daily. When Ambassador Martin made that unavoidable phone call on the morning of 29 April, the DAO Compound stood ready to begin the helicopter evacuation of Saigon. Only one task remained.²⁴

Before the Americans departed South Vietnam, all sensitive equipment and gear had to be demolished to preclude its capture by the North Vietnamese. Captain McManus and Master Sergeant East already had been assigned that mission: destruction of designated controlled areas within the DAO compound. As the two men set their explosives on the evening of 29 April, they undertook a historic task, elimination of



9th MAB After Action Report

This 9th MAB post-operational summary map shows potential evacuation sites including Can Tho and its airport. Consul General Francis McNamara and SSgt Boyette S. Hasty explored the possibility of a fixed-wing evacuation, but quickly cancelled it when they learned there was no way to preclude being overrun by panicked South Vietnamese.

the last home to America's military in South Vietnam.²⁸

Consulate Marines

As the pace of preparations for the Advance Command Element and the AESF accelerated with the fall of Xuan Loc, a cloud of uncertainty settled over the two remaining American consulates in South Vietnam. The loss of Xuan Loc, earlier counted as the only

ARVN "victory," catapulted both the consulate at Bien Hoa and that at Can Tho into hectic preparations for what now appeared to be the inevitable.

With the eastern gateway to the nation's capital fully open, Bien Hoa stood as the only obstacle in the NVA's path to Saigon. This increased exposure made the American consulate highly vulnerable and as a consequence, Consul General Richard Peters directed his

staff and the Marine detachment to begin preparations for the consulate's closure. Gunnery Sergeant Robert W. Schlager, the noncommissioned officer-in-charge of the detachment, ordered his Marines to assist the staff in this effort. During the three days preceding and following the end of the battle for Xuan Loc, the Marines in the Bien Hoa Detachment (Sergeant Ronald E. Duffy, Sergeant James M. Felber, Corporal Carlos R. Arraigna, Corporal Gary N. Lindholm, and Lance Corporal Dean M. Kinzie) either destroyed or transferred to Washington every piece of sensitive gear and all classified documents. On 24 April, Consul General Peters, his staff, and the Marine detachment closed the consulate and returned to Saigon. Due to confusion and uncertainty over how the war would end, the Consul's staff closed and locked the facility, but left the American flag flying. A few days later, when it became obvious that there would be no negotiated settlement, the consul general's deputy, Charles Lahiguera, and two of the detachment's Marines returned to Bien Hoa and properly retired the colors. This event and the Bien Hoa detachment's incorporation into the Marine Security Guard, Saigon, officially ended its history, leaving only one American consulate in South Vietnam. As of 29 April 1975, a detachment of Marines still guarded the Can Tho consulate.

The first people to know that the evacuation of that consulate had begun were not the Ambassador or even the consul general, but the Marines in the AESF. The final supply preparations orchestrated by the AESF's supply officer, Lieutenant Johnnie Johnson, barely had ended when two helicopters appeared on the horizon that Tuesday morning, 29 April.²⁹

In a matter of minutes, two Air America helicopters landed on the amphibious transport dock ship *Vancouver* (LPD 2) and discharged the first of Can Tho's evacuees. They included the bulk of the compound's CIA employees, and as far as the Navy knew, these refugees comprised the entire consulate staff at Can Tho. The Navy, using a landing craft, then transferred all of the Vietnamese refugees and one embassy official from the *Vancouver* to the *Pioneer Contender*. They chose the *Pioneer Contender* because with the *American Challenger* still unloading refugees at Phu Quoc island, the *Contender* was the only MSC ship in the area.

Later that evening, (actually 0200 on 30 April) Captain Garcia's security force would help load the rest of the Can Tho refugees including Consul General Francis McNamara, Can Tho's Marine Security Guard

detachment headed by Staff Sergeant Boyette S. Hasty, and approximately 300 Vietnamese refugees (former consulate employees and their families). Among the Vietnamese group were Staff Sergeant Hasty's mother-in-law and brothers-in-law. He had married a South Vietnamese woman only days before his forced departure from Can Tho. Their surprising arrival on the *Pioneer Contender* culminated a series of strange events which had begun several days earlier. It started with the Can Tho Consulate's Marines' efforts to prepare for the expected evacuation.

Staff Sergeant Hasty and his five Marines, Sergeant John S. Moore [his assistant], Sergeant John W. Kirchner, Sergeant Terry D. Pate, Corporal Lee J. Johnson, and Corporal Lawrence B. Killens had prepared for over two weeks for the inevitable word "to evacuate the consulate."³⁰ What they had neither prepared for, nor anticipated, were the unusual circumstances which would confront them in their attempt to depart Can Tho. Staff Sergeant Hasty recounted, "At that time, we didn't know they (CIA) were pulling their own bug-out, and we were a little bit worried about them, but it finally dawned on us they were not coming back." He said the CIA staff also had commandeered two of the consul's four LCMs previously purchased from the Alaska Barge and Transport Company.³¹

Hasty had prepared the LCMs as an alternate means of escape should an air option suddenly disappear. In preparation, he had even equipped the LCMs with M60 machine guns. Days earlier, in anticipation of using fixed-wing as a means to evacuate Americans from Can Tho, the consul general and Staff Sergeant Hasty had gone to the Can Tho Airfield and asked the base commander if he could provide protection for an air evacuation. He replied, "No! You'll be overrun as soon as the first plane lands."³²

With this option eliminated, they decided to use either the Air America helicopters or the LCMs. Thus when Saigon called at 1030 on 29 April and asked to talk with Mr. McNamara, neither the call nor the instructions surprised Staff Sergeant Hasty. The consul general told him, " 'Yes, we've received the word. We're to evacuate by helicopter immediately.' " That was not to be, as less than 30 minutes later Saigon called back and ordered them to send the helicopters to them—empty!³³

In relating this peculiar turn of events, Sergeant Hasty stated: "I was called back upstairs and the consul general told me that Saigon had called; Saigon needed our four helicopters to help them evacuate. So we sent our four helicopters up to Saigon. As it



Marine Corps Historical Collection

An LCM-8 with a load of Marines awaits the order to move out. Boats similar to this one were used by the consulate staff and SSgt Hasty and his Marines to evacuate Can Tho.

turned out, all four did not get to Saigon because the CIA people in Can Tho got for sure one, and we're almost positive two, of the helicopters."³⁴

Now with the sea as the only available escape route, everyone climbed into the two LCMs. (They chose not to use a barge they also had purchased, because it would have slowed their speed of movement too much.) A further complication occurred, Hasty said, when the CIA officials left behind some of their local employees in the frantic effort to leave. He stated, "The CIA pulled out, leaving behind their three Filipino employees, some of their Vietnamese employees, and one American CIA agent, their communicator."³⁵ The AESF's report that the *Vancouver* picked up 68 Vietnamese refugees and one embassy official from Can Tho early on the 29th conflicted with Hasty's statement, and confirmed that the CIA agents must have taken a large number of their employees with them, but nonetheless their actions still left the consul general with serious problems.³⁶

As the last group of people boarded the LCMs, the Marines, and the consulate staff suddenly realized that none of them knew how to drive a LCM. Hasty said: "The consul general . . . a former naval officer was the only one that had any concept whatsoever. So the consul general, wearing the helmet we had given him as a souvenir, got behind the helm of the LCM, looked at it awhile, played with it awhile, and said, 'I can run it.' And he could."³⁷

Clearing this hurdle, the "convoy" departed Can Tho for a 60-mile journey down the Basaac River through Viet Cong-NVA territory that save for a miracle could have been anyone's last trip. Just as they were entering the most hazardous part of the journey where the river narrows, the realization that disaster awaited them suddenly flooded their consciousness. Having already suffered through one firefight during which small boats manned by Viet Cong attacked, and without the air cover that the Embassy had promised in earlier discussions over what would happen should the consul and his staff need to conduct a waterborne evacuation, they found themselves in desperate need of help. Unbelievably, it arrived in the form of an intense downpour which obscured their presence from the enemy-infested shoreline. Staff Sergeant Hasty said: "Luckily, we did not take a round into the LCMs, because if we had it would have been like tossing a grenade into a garbage can. After that firefight, we

figured we were going to be in for a hell of a time, or we would have to be awfully damn lucky to get out. It rained so heavy and so hard you couldn't see the banks of the river, and that is what saved us."³⁸

During the conversations in which air cover was discussed, the American Embassy, Saigon, also promised Consul General McNamara that a U.S. Navy ship would be waiting to pick him and his staff up as soon as they reached the coastline. Yet when the two LCMs and its passengers reached the mouth of the river at approximately 1900, they beheld an unnerving sight—empty ocean! As far as the eye could see, not a ship or vessel of any kind was on the horizon. Certain that, as Sergeant Hasty said, "We were on our own," they headed out to sea in their flat-bottomed boats.³⁹

Expecting to see a Navy ship at any moment, they chugged along while sending out "Maydays" every few minutes. For over six hours, they searched the seas for any sign of life and finally well into the seventh hour, one of the men spotted what appeared to be a ship's light. They headed in the direction of the light, firing clusters of flares at 20 minute intervals. Despite never receiving a radio response or a return signal, the Can Tho Marines and Consul General McNamara pursued the ship for an hour. Finally reaching it, they discovered as Staff Sergeant Hasty described, "They (the *Pioneer Contender*) were not expecting us, were not waiting for us. They just happened to be there."⁴⁰

The *Pioneer Contender* did not "just happen to be there." Instead, it had been sent there to pick up the Can Tho refugees; a task it had accomplished earlier that day (or so the ship's captain thought). The truth was that Captain Garcia's Marines had seen the flares and reported the sighting to the ship's crew, but the crew chose to disregard them, assuming the flashes to be ARVN fire on the shore. Reassured in the thought that they already had their consulate evacuees on board, they ignored such strange sightings.

Once on board the *Pioneer Contender*, Sergeant Hasty said that his men immediately began assisting the Victor Detachment Marines. "I just attached my Marines to the ship's Marines to assist in loading refugees." His stay on the *Pioneer Contender* was very short and after several transfers, he eventually reached a Navy ship.⁴¹

On 1 May, after first riding on a Japanese tugboat and then a Korean LST, he finally placed his feet on the deck of the *Blue Ridge*, ending three harrowing and tiresome days of fear and frustration, and the official history of the Marine Security Guard Can Tho.⁴²

*Records do not reflect who operated the second LCM and in the book, *The Fall of Saigon*, the author described them using two LCMs and a rice barge.

PART V
OPERATION FREQUENT WIND
AND A NEW BEGINNING

CHAPTER 11

The Evacuation

9th MAB—The DAO Compound—The Embassy

On Monday morning, 28 April, Major James E. Livingston, RLT 4 operations officer, and Major Morris W. “Moose” Lutes, ProvMAG-39 executive officer, climbed on board an Air America helicopter bound for the DAO Compound. One of the numerous daily shuttles flown by Air America to enable the 9th MAB to conduct evacuation preparations at the DAO without exceeding the Paris Accords’ limit of a maximum of 50 military personnel in South Vietnam, this flight carried Livingston and Lutes into Tan Son Nhut for a liaison visit with the DAO evacuation planners. Their mission that day included a review of the evacuation plan and a reconnaissance of the DAO, Air America Compound, the Embassy, and the Newport Pier area. Earlier in the week Lieutenant Colonel William E. McKinstry, the officer-in-charge of the Evacuation Control Center (located in his office in the DAO building), had accompanied Colonel Alfred M. Gray, Jr., the regimental commander, on a similar reconnaissance.¹

Ambassador Graham A. Martin had instructed Major General Homer D. Smith, Jr., USA, that he did not want to exceed the “50” limit and as a consequence he expected every visitor to return to the task force no later than midnight each day. This restriction placed a tremendous burden on the Air America pilots who were tasked with providing transportation in the unfamiliar circumstances of night shipboard operations. Despite their lack of experience and expertise in landing on a ship at night, these pilots displayed remarkable skill and courage in safely delivering their passengers. Due to the high demand for outbound seats, on occasion visitors would be bumped from a flight and forced to remain overnight. On the evening of 28 April, a Vietnamese general and an Army colonel acquired the seats that Majors Livingston and Lutes planned to use to return to the *Blue Ridge*, forcing them to remain in the DAO Compound overnight. That evening, the NVA subjected Tan Son Nhut and the adjoining “Pentagon East” to a rocket attack, launching a series of events which ended with the decision the next morning to execute Operation Frequent Wind. Major Livingston, still in the compound as a result of his involuntary stay, talked by radio with his

commander, Colonel Gray, and provided him a firsthand account of the situation in the DAO. He also made recommendations as to the size of the force necessary to secure the landing zones for the impending operation.²

Very early the next morning, approximately 0500 29 April, in a room behind an unmarked door, three officers met and discussed the preceding night’s events. Having just returned from their individual trailers where they had stolen a couple of hours of sleep, these members of the Special Planning Group (SPG) concluded that today would be “the day.” A few minutes

Capt Anthony A. Wood, seen here as a lieutenant colonel, helped devise the evacuation routes used to move third-country nationals from downtown Saigon to the DAO. Since he named the routes after western trails, fellow officers dubbed him the “Wagonmaster.”

Photo courtesy of Col Anthony A. Wood, USMC

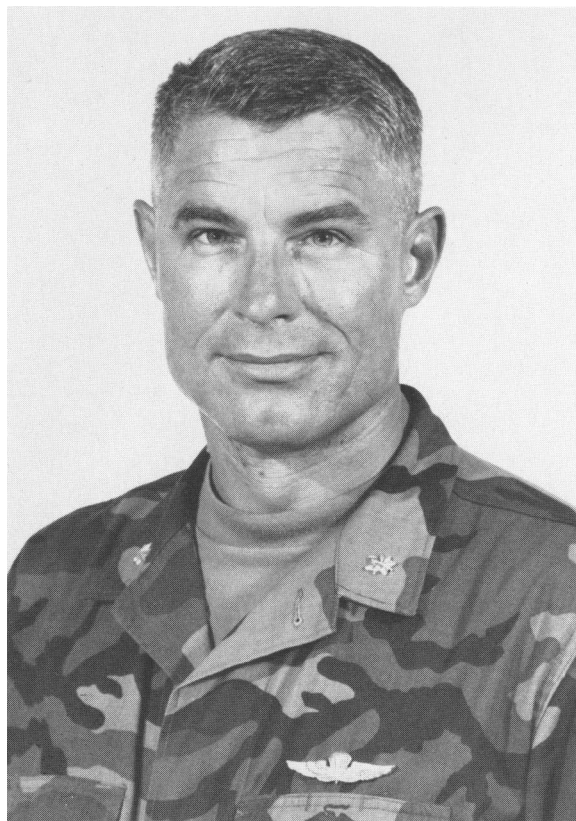




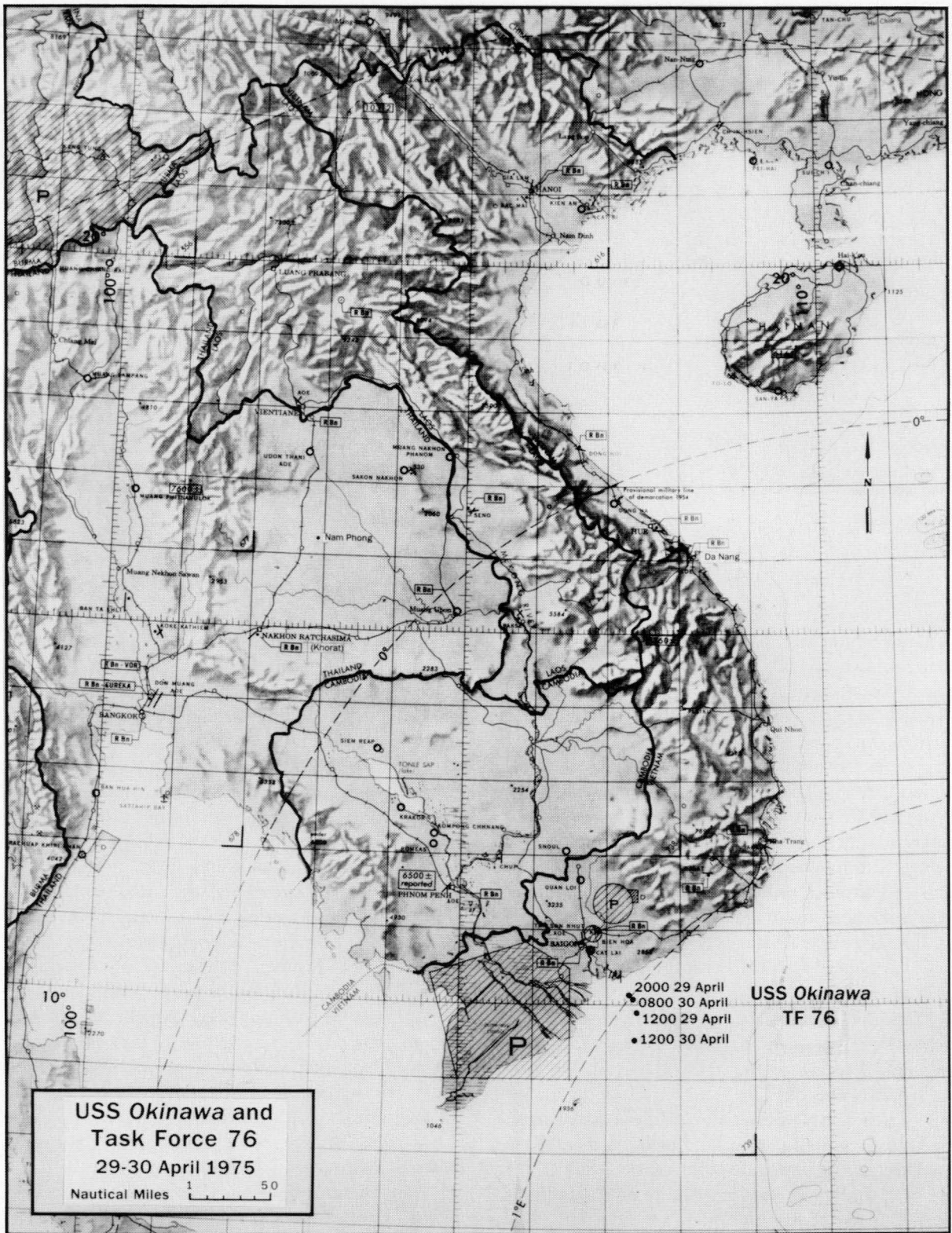
Photo courtesy of Capt Russell R. Thurman, USMC (Ret)

Members of the press evacuate Saigon on Marine CH-53s via the DAO compound. Many refused to board the DAO buses at the way stations and had to be reminded that Ambassador Martin had given the order for all Americans to leave South Vietnam.

later, Colonel Eugene R. "Pat" Howard, Jr., the officer General Smith had chosen to oversee all evacuation matters for the DAO, entered the building referred to as "the bunker" and confirmed their predictions. He said that he had just talked with the Defense Attache and received instructions to begin preparations to execute the surface evacuation of Saigon. Colonel Howard, Major Jaime Sabater, Jr., Captain George Petry, and Captain Anthony A. Wood reviewed their earlier activities, and noted that convoy buses had been prestaged throughout metropolitan Saigon at buildings designated as pick-up points, American civilians, fully trained to drive those buses, were standing by in town at the way stations, and the drivers of the fake national police cars along with their guides awaited only the word to depart.

Within two hours, Captain Wood, his driver—a Marine lance corporal, and his radio operator—a Marine sergeant, were "riding the trails" of Saigon, checking on Santa Fe, Oregon, Texas, and the rest of the routes. His presence as a coordinator in downtown Saigon facilitated communications and placed a member of the DAO staff at the scene of the action. The PRC-25 radios, used by the evacuees waiting on the rooftops for the arrival of the Air America helicopters, came in loud and clear as long as no large building blocked their line-of-sight transmission. As a result, Captain

Wood depended on the Motorolas to monitor the progress of the convoys because they were the only radios which consistently worked in the built-up areas of the city. Captain Wood's presence in downtown Saigon on 29 April helped to enhance the effectiveness of the bluff, but more importantly, it permitted him to troubleshoot problems as they arose. This part of the plan worked so well that the DAO successfully cycled the convoys through Saigon—not the hoped for one time, but three times. As the "Wagonmaster" rode the streets of Saigon, monitoring the radio and checking on the progress of each trail, he encountered several incidents necessitating quick action. The first problem requiring attention occurred on the Santa Fe trail when a few members of the press refused to board the bus and Captain Wood had to remind them that the Ambassador had ordered all Americans to leave Saigon. After resolving this problem, the convoy's bus driver subsequently made a wrong turn and became lost in the crowded streets of downtown Saigon. Although unfamiliar with that part of the city, Captain Wood eventually got the convoy on the right road to Tan Son Nhut. The second happened on the Oregon trail when Captain Wood received a request to pick up the Ambassador's dog. The final and most difficult problem arose when the South Vietnamese guarding the main gate at Tan Son Nhut refused to



Map adapted from U.S. Air Force, *USAF Global Navigation and Planning Chart, Southeast Asia*. (10 June 1959); hatched areas and other land notations are a part of the original map.

allow the last convoy of buses into the DAO Compound. As this was happening, a firefght between two ARVN units broke out and caught the rearmost buses in the crossfire, disabling two of the vehicles. Eventually, Lieutenant Colonel McKinstry convinced the ARVN commander controlling the gates to permit the remaining buses to enter the compound. General Carey's threat to use the armed Cobras flying overhead probably played a large role in the ARVN commander's decision.* Shortly thereafter, the Air America helicopter pilots, who had been delayed by various problems of their own, completed the last pickups from the rooftop LZs. The "bluff" had worked—over-the-road evacuation of Saigon ended as the 9th MAB deployed its ground security force in the "Pentagon East."³

9th MAB

After floating off the coast of South Vietnam for over a week, the 9th MAB was more than ready for action. Every day since its arrival the task force had expected orders to begin the evacuation, but the only directives it received changed the response time. The first change arrived only hours before the 18th ARVN Division abandoned Xuan Loc. On that afternoon, Admiral Steele notified the MAB of CinCPac's desire to begin a six-hour alert stance before day's end.⁴

As the situation in South Vietnam, and especially Saigon, deteriorated, the standby reaction times decreased. On the night of the 27th, Admiral Steele directed the 9th MAB to be in a one-hour alert status before sunrise the next morning. Accomplishing this, the brigade waited. When it became apparent later in the day that action was unlikely, Admiral Steele authorized the MAB to relax its readiness to a six-hour standby condition. Within hours of this decision, he received word that Tan Son Nhut Airport had been attacked by enemy aircraft. Early evening, 28 April, a few hours after the Tan Son Nhut incident, Admiral Gayler (CinCPac) reduced the reaction time to one hour. At 0130, 9th MAB reported to Admiral Whitmire (CTF 76) and General Burns (USSAG/Seventh Air Force) that it was ready. Now, all awaited L-Hour.⁵

Despite prior arrangements, questions over L-Hour still created some confusion at this point in the operation. General Burns initially had defined L-Hour as the time that a helicopter would be launched for a

given zone. To Marine pilots though, L-Hour meant the time a helicopter would land in a given zone. During the latter stages of planning, Admiral Whitmire requested a clarification of L-Hour. General Burns' staff responded that L-Hour was the time that the first helicopter touched down in the evacuation zone, a reversal of the original definition. Based on this change in L-Hour, it then became necessary for the planners to modify the helicopter flow schedule. Admiral Whitmire and General Carey, in a joint message to Admiral Steele and all the participants in the operation, issued a helicopter time schedule which reflected and complied with their understanding of USSAG's definition of L-Hour.⁶

Yet on the evening of 28 April in the USSAG (call sign "Blue Chip") command bunker, General Burns sent a messenger to the Marine Corps liaison desk manned by Lieutenant Colonel James L. Cunningham (III MAF plans officer) and Major Richard K. "Keith" Young (9th MAB operations officer), who were in Nakhon Phanom to assist the joint command in its coordination and control of the operation. The messenger informed Major Young that General Burns had a question about the definition of L-Hour and would like to see him. Major Young recalled his conversation with the USSAG commander: "He asked me how the 9th MAB defined L-Hour and I explained to him the Marine Corps used the time a helicopter landed in the zone as L-Hour and not the time it took off. He seemed surprised by the difference and could not understand why four hours would pass before the first elements of the security force landed in the zone."⁷

Adding to the confusion created by the difference between the Air Force and Marine Corps definitions of L-Hour** was the relationship between L-Hour and

**Years later, Admiral Steele proffered his assessment of the confusion over L-Hour. He said: "This deplorable mix-up over L-Hour never would have occurred, except for the subordination of the Seventh Fleet and the Seventh Fleet Marines to CG, USSAG. The *Blue Ridge* with Rear Admiral Whitmire and General Carey embarked was in close company with the *Oklahoma City*, my flagship. As the evacuation preparations began after execution, I had the *Oklahoma City* fall in astern of the *Blue Ridge* at 1,000 yards and transferred my flag to the *Blue Ridge*, which had better communications than the Seventh Fleet flagship. Early on the morning of 29 April, Rear Admiral Whitmire had called me on a secure voice radio requesting instructions on the execution. CinCPacFlt was saying one thing, and CG, USSAG was saying another. I instructed Whitmire to follow General Burns' direction and so informed CinCPacFlt. My reason for going over to *Blue Ridge* was simply to keep higher authority off Whitmire and Carey's back, particularly now that confusion had developed regarding L-Hour, and in view of the complicated chain of command that had been set up." Steele Comments.

*Captain Wood, in radio communication with the Ground Security Force, was asked by Colonel Gray if he could control a close air support mission and he replied, "I can see and I can control." An air strike was never delivered because the ARVN commander got what he was after—a way out of Saigon. Wood Comments.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A150967

While USSAG Headquarters tried to clarify L-Hours, reconnaissance aircraft spotted a North Vietnamese Army convoy, lower left, entering Saigon on the afternoon of 29 April. The next day, President Duong Van "Big" Minh ordered his soldiers to lay down their arms.

the one-hour alert posture. The alert signified that the forces had one hour to get into position before the start of the operation. Weeks earlier the brigade's air planners had computed 30 minutes as the flight time from the average ship's location to the farthest landing zone, the Defense Attache Office Compound, adjacent to Tan Son Nhut Airfield. Combining the 90 minutes needed for crossdecking operations with the 30 minutes of flight time automatically added two hours to the hour of standby time. Thus a one-hour response time meant that from the moment the order to begin was received until the first helicopter landed in Saigon three hours would elapse. This parameter had to be further modified by the Air Force's restrictions. USSAG/Seventh Air Force's operational order required that a fixed-wing aircraft be on station before any evacuation helicopter entered the city. For its support aircraft to achieve control of the target area and bring to bear maximum firepower, the Air Force required three hours preparation time to launch, refuel enroute, and arrive on station, which for a one-hour alert status translated into four hours, the amount of time between the word to begin and the earliest moment a Marine helicopter could land in the zone.

At the same time the 9th MAB was preparing for the helicopter evacuation which they had been expecting for the past three days, the Evacuation Control Center was preparing for a final and massive fixed-

wing evacuation schedule. At 2000 on 28 April, it announced that the evacuation would resume at 2330. The plan, unrealistic in its expectations, called for 50 to 60 sorties to lift over 10,000 people. Shortly after midnight, the scheduled start time was slipped to 0330. Between 0300 and 0330 the first of the C-130s landed. Despite planning to carry refugees, each of these three aircraft, for some unexplained reason, carried a BLU-82 weapon.*

For obvious reasons, each bomb had to be carefully unloaded. Nearly one-half hour passed before the South Vietnamese completed the task. Minutes later the North Vietnamese Army delivered an unfriendly welcome to Option II of the evacuation plan (military fixed-wing airlift). Besides altering the alert posture of the 9th MAB, the ensuing artillery and rocket attack on the Tan Son Nhut Airfield, which began just before 0400, destroyed one C-130 and forced the other two to leave empty. Before their hasty departure, they picked up the crew of the destroyed Her-

*BLU-82 is a 15,000-pound bomb known "affectionately" as the "Daisy Cutter" because it is used to destroy vegetation in jungle areas selected for use as helicopter landing zones. BLU is the U.S. Air Force acronym for Bomb Live Unit. During the NVA Spring Offensive the VNAF had used BLU-82s as a poor man's substitute for the B-52, employing C-130s as the delivery platform. At the end of the battle for Xuan Loc, the VNAF dropped one of them on the 341st NVA Division's headquarters.

cules, barely avoiding getting hit themselves. With debris jettisoned from scrambling VNAF aircraft scattered all over the airport's apron, taxiway, and runway, the rescheduled lift was temporarily suspended and eventually cancelled after the Ambassador's mid-morning visit to General Smith's office.⁸

Thus in a matter of a few, short hours the fixed-wing airlift of Saigon evacuees ceased being even a remote possibility, and the helicopter became the only way out. It would be a few more hours until Ambassador Martin's painful decision translated into action.

By the morning of Tuesday, 29 April, everyone in the task force knew the status of the North Vietnamese offensive and the peril that Saigon faced, and wondered why the evacuation had not begun. Waiting for the word to "execute," the 9th MAB began the day just as it had the previous three days, very early, shortly after midnight. This day, however, was different.

LtCol George P. Slade, commander, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines waits for the signal to board the lead aircraft for Saigon. BLT 2/4 and the other Marines of 9th MAB spent many hours waiting, but knew after the morning rocket attack which had killed two Marine Security Guards, that the day, 29 April, was "the day."

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



In anticipation of a long day for his pilots, with a substantial part of it spent strapped in the helicopter, General Carey directed his aviators to assume a standby position on the flight deck; outside rather than inside their craft. After waiting in the vicinity of their respective helicopters from 0200 to almost 1100, the pilots stood down and went to lunch. Their break however was shortlived.⁹

At approximately the time the pilots started heading for chow, General Carey received an update from Colonel Wylie W. Taylor, his deputy in the DAO Compound. His call included "the information that two Marines were KIA as a result of the rocket attack."* An earlier call from Major Livingston to Colonel Gray also had informed the 9th MAB staff of the rocket attack and the death of Corporal McMahon and Lance Corporal Judge. Based on these two reports and recommendations from his deputy commander and his RLT 4 commander, General Carey decided that initially he would insert one battalion, Lieutenant Colonel George P. Slade's 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, into the DAO Compound and Annex. Then later, if necessary for crowd control and security, he would send a command group and a company from Lieutenant Colonel Royce L. Bond's 1st Battalion, 9th Marines into the Air America Compound.¹⁰

Finally, the waiting was over. Admiral Gayler directed USSAG/Seventh Air Force and Seventh Fleet to begin Frequent Wind Option IV at 1051 (Saigon time). With that announcement the evacuation of Saigon officially began.¹¹

The DAO Compound

At 1215, the 9th MAB received General Burns' message directing them to "execute." For some unexplainable reason, dissemination of this message to the participating units had been delayed from 1052 until 1215.**¹² Captain William R. Melton, a company com-

*Colonel Taylor offered his opinion of this tragic loss: "This event had major influence at all levels, and I believe, really was the triggering event for Frequent Wind." Taylor Comments.

**On the morning of 29 April confusion still existed at USSAG headquarters over which definition of L-Hour the Navy-Marine Corps team was using, and attempts to clarify when crossdecking could begin and when the helicopters could depart delayed the execute message's official passage from Nakhon Phanom to the Seventh Fleet—and worse, clouded its intent. The misunderstanding between USSAG and the task force produced several postponements of L-Hour and as a result of this perceived problem, the Joint Chiefs of Staff commissioned a formal investigation team, headed by Major General John R. D. Cleland, Jr., USA, to determine exactly what took place during the execution of Operation Frequent Wind. The investigation team reached the conclusion that no abnormal delay occurred. Cleland Report.



Photo courtesy of Capt Russell R. Thurman, USMC (Ret) *Capt William R. Melton, commander of Company G, BLT 2/4, briefs his men. Capt Melton's Marines participated in both Eagle Pull and Frequent Wind.*

mander in BLT 2/4, said, "An unsubstantiated rumor circulating among the ship's company and the Marines on the *Okinawa* was that the message somehow had gotten lost in the *Blue Ridge's* message center."¹³

The delay in passing the message coincided with the MAB's decision to break for lunch, and as a consequence, the pilots were in the ship's mess when the execute message arrived. Captain Kurt A. Schrader, a helicopter commander in HMH-462, related, "We had just stood down when the ship's captain came over the 1MC (public address system) and announced that the mission was a go but the message directing it had been lost by the *Blue Ridge's* communications center."¹⁴ The sudden shift in direction initially caught everyone off guard, but within minutes the Marines and sailors had resumed their combat ready, pre-launch status. Since General Carey had not received the order to begin the operation until 1215, the landing of the first helicopter in the zone could not be expected until 1615 (based on the times contained in the operational order). All concerned deemed this expected time of arrival (ETA) unacceptable. As a consequence, the Seventh Fleet and the 9th MAB expedited their preparations, attempting to compress the four-hour package into less than three hours. Achieving this objective would nearly double the number of daylight hours available to the pilots.¹⁵

Regimental Landing Team 4 (RLT 4), commanded by Colonel Gray, wasted no time in readying itself for

an immediate departure. Only days earlier, Colonel Gray had received orders to prepare to provide a security force in support of the C-141/C-130 airlift. Word to transfer that security force never came, only causing the Marines' anticipation to intensify. The signal to mount out meant anticipation would be supplanted by action.

Aware of the situation at the compound and familiar with the time-sensitive scheme of maneuver, General Carey began crossdecking operations the instant he received the execute order.¹⁶ Each pilot rechecked his helicopter flow schedule, made last-minute, minor, but necessary changes, and transmitted them to the Helicopter Direction Center (HDC) on the *Okinawa*. Complicating all of this activity was a sky filled with South Vietnamese Air Force helicopters, looking for a place to land and disgorge their panic-stricken passengers.¹⁷

Following receipt of detailed information from the HDC on the *Okinawa*, Admiral Whitmire announced that L-Hour had changed again and would now be 1500. Despite this modification, due in large part to the continuing confusion over USSAG's understanding of L-Hour, Operation Frequent Wind was finally in motion.¹⁸

At this time, the brigade began the most critical aspect of pre-L-Hour operations: positioning the landing force. Gunnery Sergeant Russell R. Thurman, the 31st MAU public affairs specialist, recalled, "The most incredible thing that morning was the number of ships. Every direction that you looked all you could see were ships and more ships."¹⁹

The helicopter schedule took into consideration the number of ships and the distribution of helicopters. It called for the loaded and fueled helicopters to reposition themselves on the USS *Okinawa*, *Hancock*, *Dubuque*, *Denver*, *Duluth*, *Mobile*, *Peoria*, and *Vancouver*. This would be accomplished 30 minutes prior to the scheduled landing time in the zone. Essentially, it represented the same type of evolution employed at Phnom Penh, by the same squadrons: Lieutenant Colonel James L. Bolton's HMH-462 and Lieutenant Colonel Herbert M. Fix's HMH-463. Not by coincidence, they also carried the same Marines, BLT 2/4.²⁰

To make the flight schedule work, the Marines had to redistribute vast amounts of men and equipment in order to achieve some semblance of pre-mission integrity. They had either, to launch fully loaded helicopters simultaneously from various ships for an overhead rendezvous and an integrated flight to Sai-



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 7718475

Amphibious and MSC ships deploy off Vung Tau awaiting the order to begin Frequent Wind. At the last minute, confusion occurred over the definition of L-Hour and as a consequence the ships did not receive the order to "execute" until 1215, 29 April 1975.

gon, or to launch them unloaded to hold at an air orbit point until they could be loaded. Once loaded, they would return to the formation and wait for the flight to depart. If prior to this, fuel consumption became a consideration, then that helicopter would hold on deck, and just before scheduled departure, it would load troops/equipment on that ship or the one designated. If neither of these alternatives offered the proper conditions, then the Marines were prepared to spot the helicopters on board a carrier or an assault ship and use it as a platform from which to embark and launch the first wave.²¹

In anticipation of this, BLT 2/4 had distributed its infantry, reconnaissance, and engineering units among the *Okinawa*, *Vancouver*, and the *Peoria*. They totalled 23 CH-53 loads.²² The *Okinawa* housed more than half of them (twelve), while the *Vancouver* carried six and the *Peoria* five. None of the ships possessed enough space to load all of the heliteams at the same time. As a result, each helicopter picked up its passengers two hours before L-Hour and then moved as directed by HDC to deck space designated for refueling and launch. By doing this, the Marines assured themselves sufficient time to make L-Hour. In order to accomplish the complicated crossdecking maneuver with the limited space available, they had to use all of the task force's ships.²³

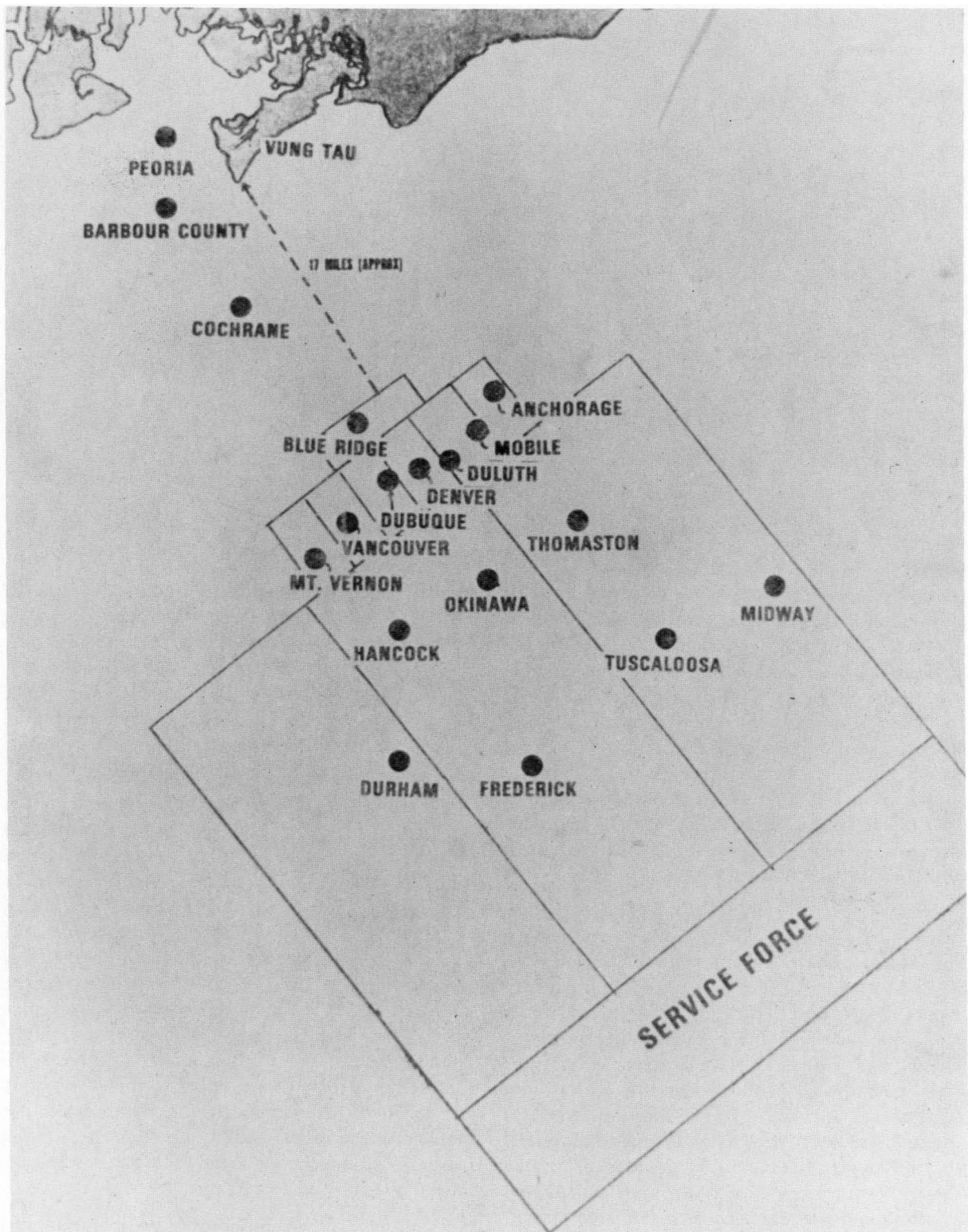
Twelve CH-53s from HMH-462 comprised the first

wave. Loaded with the BLT 2/4 command groups "A" and "B," and Company F and reinforced Company H, they departed the launch area 30 minutes prior to L-Hour in order to arrive in the DAO Compound at L-Hour, 1500. This wave actually landed at 1506.²⁴ The second wave of CH-53s consisted of 12 helicopters from HMH-463. They departed 15 minutes after the first wave and landed in the DAO Compound at 1515.

While the second wave waited for the order to begin crossdecking operations, the first wave completed its preparations by loading 10 heliteams from its ship, the *Okinawa*, and two from the *Peoria*. After the first wave completed its launch, the second wave picked up six heliteams from the *Vancouver*, three from *Peoria*, and two from *Okinawa*. HMH-463 accomplished this complex maneuver as planned, through redistribution of its assets. The squadron's crossdecking of two empty CH-53s provided a vivid illustration of the coordination required in launching a force of this size on time. Empty, they flew together to the *Peoria*. One loaded troops and moved to the *Mobile* while the other took on troops, refueled, and remained on the *Peoria*. The two then launched together for Saigon, making up a third wave.*²⁵

Unintentionally complicating this evolution were

*The 10 USAF helicopters from *Midway* joined this wave to bring the total for all three waves in the first cycle to 36 CH/HH-53s.



Marine Corps Historical Collection

This diagram shows deployment of naval forces at the start of Operation Frequent Wind. Note that at 1500 on 29 April the Blue Ridge was approximately 17 miles from Vung Tau.