



H-Gram 090: 50th Anniversary—Operations Frequent Wind and Eagle Pull

5 May 2025

This H-gram covers Operation Frequent Wind and Operation Eagle Pull, the evacuations of Saigon, South Vietnam, and Phnom Penh, Cambodia, in April 1975 as both fell to Communist forces after many years of war in Southeast Asia. Primarily conducted by U.S. Navy forces and embarked U.S. Marines, Frequent Wind was the largest helicopter evacuation in history (over 7,000 people), although many more refugees came out by sea and were rescued by the U.S. Navy (over 50,000). Also, as this is the 80th anniversary of World War II, I include links to previous H-grams, including Operation Teardrop (the last Battle of the Atlantic engagement), and multiple H-grams regarding the Battle of Okinawa.

Overview

The fall of Cambodia and the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam) are events this country tried to forget, especially after the Nixon administration secretly promised the South Vietnamese government that the U.S. would intervene if North Vietnam violated the 1973 Paris Peace Accords, and we didn't honor that promise. However, forgetting is not my job. Despite the calamity of the collapse of an entire nation, in many respects Operation Frequent Wind was one of the U.S. Navy's finest hours, as the Navy rescued many thousands of Vietnamese civilians by air and by sea, in addition to U.S. personnel, many of whom would otherwise have met a sad fate at the hands of the Communists. In a number of



Evacuation of South Vietnam, 19 April 1975: A Vietnamese air force HU-1 helicopter is pushed over the side of USS *Blue Ridge* (LCC-19) to clear space for other helicopters to land. Fifteen Vietnamese helicopters landed on the ship with military personnel and their families during the evacuation. Note doors stripped off to ensure sinking (NHHHC USN-711644).

cases, U.S. Navy commanders took risks out of compassion, something that sets the United States apart from our opponents.

"I had to live with my grandmother yelling in my ear, 'Do the right thing!'"

—Captain Lawrence Cleveland Chambers, commanding officer, *Midway* (CVA-41)

At one point on 29 April, Captain Lawrence Cleveland Chambers counted 26 South Vietnamese helicopters circling his ship at the same time, none of which could communicate by radio, all trying to land. None of this was according to the evacuation plan. In command of *Midway* for only a few weeks, Chambers rightly saw this as a disaster waiting to happen. This period would be described as the 30 most-dangerous hours in *Midway's* history. Nevertheless, using only hand signals, the flight deck crew brought 45 Vietnamese UH-1 Huey helos aboard without any having to ditch.

Late on 29 April (no account seems to have the time), a single-engine South Vietnam Air Force Cessna O-1C Bird Dog observation aircraft with its landing lights on began circling *Midway*. Despite a Vietnamese interpreter, attempts to establish radio communication with the plane were unsuccessful. The plane conducted a low flyby of the flight deck and dropped a note, which blew over the side. A second attempt also blew away. Weighted with the pilot's pistol belt, the third note landed on the flight deck. The note read, "Can you move these helicopter to the other side, I can land on your runway, I can fly 1 hour more, we have enough time to move. Please rescue me. Major Buang wife and 5 child." As this went on, Captain Chambers sought guidance from the embarked flag officer, Rear Admiral William Harris (commander, Carrier Group 7), who initially directed that the plane should ditch alongside. However, it became apparent that the aircraft was crammed with a number of children. Ditching the fixed-landing-gear aircraft would cause it to flip over, almost certainly killing all aboard.

Captain Chambers ordered the air boss to clear the deck and called for volunteers to move the numerous Vietnamese helicopters. The arresting gear wires were taken in. Any Vietnamese aircraft that could not be moved quickly and safely was pushed over the side—five UH-1 Hueys and one CH-47 Chinook went into the water (about \$10 million worth of aircraft at the time). Five other orbiting UH-1s took that opportunity to land all at once. After their passengers were safe, those five helos were also jettisoned over the side.

With the deck finally clear, the O-1 commenced an approach while *Midway* transmitted in the blind in Vietnamese about dangerous downdrafts behind the ship.

If the O-1 had a tailhook, it would have caught the no. 3 wire (i.e., a near-perfect landing). Out of the plane tumbled Major Buang-Ly, his wife with an infant in her arms, and four other small children to boisterous cheers and hand-waving of *Midway's* crew.

The combination of desperation and courage for Major Buang-Ly, having never even seen an aircraft carrier before, to fly into the unknown in hopes of finding a ship to save his family is almost unfathomable. The crew of *Midway* established a fund to assist the family in going to the United States, where all seven became naturalized U.S. citizens. Captain Chambers made rear admiral and commanded the *Coral Sea* (CV-43) Battle Group in support of Operation Eagle Claw, the attempted rescue of U.S. diplomats held hostage in Tehran, Iran, launched from *Nimitz* (CVN-68) in 1980. Chambers was only the second African American to graduate from Annapolis ('52) and the first to become a carrier skipper. The O-1 Bird Dog was saved and is in the Naval History and Heritage Command (NHHC) National Naval Aviation Museum in Pensacola.

The recovery of the O-1 Bird Dog on *Midway* was just one of many extraordinary events that occurred that day, many requiring the utmost in innovation, adaptability, courage, and humanity on the part of the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps in the midst of great tragedy. In April of 1979, Communist Khmer Rouge forces were making a final push on the capital of Cambodia, Phnom Penh, while the North Vietnamese Army offensive in South Vietnam was closing in on the capital of South Vietnam, Saigon.

The evacuation of Americans from Phnom Penh occurred first, on 12 April 1975, in Operation Eagle Pull. Executed primarily by marine helicopters launching from *Okinawa* (LPH-3) and *Hancock* (CVA-19) (configured as a helicopter carrier), Operational Eagle Pull was in many ways a textbook example of a successful non-combatant evacuation; it was aided by a Khmer Rouge decision not to intervene (artillery rounds only began to impact the landing zone as the last evacuation helos were airborne) and by an overestimation of the number of evacuees. Marine CH-53 helos evacuated 289 people (145 Americans and 205 Cambodians and third country nationals) safely to the ships in the Gulf of Siam;

however, as many as 3 million Cambodians died in the genocide that followed.

Operation Frequent Wind, the evacuation of Saigon, was much more complicated. The plan had four options, all entailing getting as many people out as possible by commercial and military air, with a helicopter evacuation as the last resort. Over 50,000 people were evacuated by air before North Vietnamese artillery shut down the primary airfield at Tan Son Nhut, necessitating the helicopter option, executed on 28/29 April 1971.

The U.S. Navy assembled the largest force off Vietnam since 1972 to support Frequent Wind, including *Blue Ridge* (LCC-19) as flagship for both Seventh Fleet and the Amphibious Task Force 76 (CTF-76). Four aircraft carriers were involved: *Enterprise* (CVA[N]-65) and *Coral Sea* (CVA-43), while *Midway* was configured to operate U.S. Air Force helicopters and *Hancock* was configured to operate U.S. Marine Corps helicopters. *Okinawa* and two amphibious ready groups provided additional marine helicopters for the evacuation.

The helo lift from the primary landing zone at the Defense Attaché Office (DAO) compound on 29 April went very efficiently and pretty much according to plan. The lift from the U.S. embassy was a different story; instead of a planned 100 evacuees there were 2,500. Nevertheless, the Navy-Marine team adapted and got more than 2,000 out before direction from Washington prematurely ended the operations, leaving 400 Vietnamese national embassy employees and families behind.

What was not envisioned in the Frequent Wind plan was the exodus of 100 or more South Vietnamese helicopters crammed with refugee families flying out to the ships seeking to land. Combined with the operations of over 70 U.S. helicopters, this created a very hazardous situation. Nevertheless, the U.S. ships brought most of the helos aboard, rescuing the refugees, then jettisoning the helos over the side to make room for more while also putting boats in the water to rescue most of the crews and passengers of helos that ditched due to lack of fuel or space. As this was going on, hundreds of small boats with thousands of refugees came out to the U.S. ships seeking safety and most were rescued.

The unsung heroes of the operation were the civilian-manned ships, tugs, and barges of the Military Sealift Command (MSC) that rescued many thousands of people out of Saigon, Vung Tau, and the small boats. What also was not foreseen was the exit of every seaworthy ship in the South Vietnamese navy, loaded with 30,000 sailors and their families, which were then escorted by the U.S. Navy (and reflagged to the United States) to Subic Bay, Philippines. By 2 May, when the operation technically ended, there were about 6,000 Vietnamese refugees aboard U.S. Navy ships and 44,000 aboard the MSC ships.

Although Operation Frequent Wind was considered a great success, it marked the unsuccessful end of a costly war and was essentially the result of a promise the United States did not keep.

Postscript: In 2018, the office of U.S. Congresswoman Stephanie Murphy (born in Vietnam in late 1978 and named Dang Thi Ngoc Dung) contacted NHHHC via the Office of Legislative Affairs to inquire if we could identify the U.S. Navy ship that provided fuel, food, and water to her family (she was an infant) when they were adrift on a boat in the South China Sea. NHHHC determined the ship was *Lynde McCormick* (DDG-8) and the date was 5 June 1979. At a presentation arranged by her office to be attended by her family as a surprise, I presented a framed display that included a photo of the ship, copy of the log page, and position on a chart. There was much crying and hugging as a result. That a refugee baby could be saved by a U.S. Navy ship and make her way to the land of freedom and opportunity and become a member of the United States Congress—that is what makes America exceptional.

For more on Operation Frequent Wind and Eagle Pull please see attachment H-090-1.

80th Anniversary of the End of World War II in the Atlantic, April–May 1945

H-Gram 047: The Last Battle of the Atlantic—Operation Teardrop

80th Anniversary of the Battle of Okinawa, April–June 1945

H-Gram 043: The Ship That Wouldn't Die (1)—The Ordeal of USS *Franklin* (CV-13), 19 March 1945

H-Gram 044: "Floating Chrysanthemums"—The Naval Battle of Okinawa

H-Gram 045: The Ship That Wouldn't Die (2)—USS *Laffey* (DD-724), 16 April 1945

H-Gram 046: "Chrysanthemums from Hell"

H-Gram 048: The Naval Battle of Okinawa—U.S. Flagships Hit, May–June 1945

H-Gram 049: The Naval Battle of Okinawa—Victory

As always, H-grams may be freely disseminated. Previous H-grams may be found [here](#).

H-Gram 090-1: Operations Frequent Wind and Eagle Pull, April 1975

H-Gram 090, Attachment 1
Samuel J. Cox, Director NHHC
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Background

The Paris Peace Accords signed on 27 January 1973 were officially named the “Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam.” U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger described the accords as “peace with honor.” However, the agreement neither ended the war nor restored peace; it only ended U.S. military involvement. The agreement called for a ceasefire, the withdrawal of all U.S. troops from Vietnam, the release of American prisoners of war (POWs), the withdrawal of foreign troops from Laos and Cambodia, and a political settlement to include elections. The agreement was signed by the United States, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam), the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam), and the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam (the Viet Cong). The U.S. Senate refused to ratify the treaty, but the U.S. abided by the terms, withdrawing troops and receiving the POWs in return. Kissinger and the lead North Vietnamese negotiator of the accord, Le Duc Tho, were jointly awarded the 1973 Nobel Peace Prize. Although Le Duc Tho was the first Asian ever awarded the prize, he refused to accept it on grounds that the war was not over, and he was right.

The South Vietnamese government signed the accord with the greatest of reluctance and only did so under secret assurance from the Nixon administration that in the event the North Vietnamese broke the accord, the United States would intervene with massive air power, as during the 1972 Easter Offensive the North Vietnamese conventional invasion of the South was beaten back in large measure due to U.S. Navy carrier aviation. At the same time, the Nixon administration was secretly



Boats of South Vietnamese refugees approach USS *Durham* (LKA-114) during a rainstorm, 4 April 1975. They would be transferred from *Durham* to another ship for passage to a safe zone (NHHC K-107629).

informing the North Vietnamese, via the Soviets and China, that if they waited “a decent interval” before invading the South (again) the U.S. would not intervene.

The accord called for elections to determine the ultimate government of Vietnam; these were never held. A key flaw of the accord was that the so-called ceasefire left significant border areas of South Vietnam under the control of about 100,000 North Vietnamese troops (the People’s Army of Vietnam [PAVN]), resulting in constant violations of the ceasefire by both North and South Vietnamese forces. In addition, “foreign troops” (i.e., PAVN—Who? Us?) did not withdraw from the border areas of Laos and Cambodia. In fact, the North Vietnamese took the opportunity to widen, and pave, the Ho Chi Minh

Trail, the system of trails through Laos and Cambodia through which the North resupplied their forces fighting in the South throughout the entire war. Many U.S. aircraft had been lost in countless, and ultimately futile, bombing raids on this supply route. In 1974, the North Vietnamese increased the number of PAVN troops in the border area to about 250,000 and even ran a fuel pipeline into the central highlands of South Vietnam to sustain PAVN forces.

In 1973, the Army of the Republic of (South) Vietnam (ARVN) did not lack for manpower or equipment, with about 650,000 regular and regional troops. The Vietnam Air Force (VNAF) was at that point the fourth largest in the world. The Vietnam Navy (VNN) had almost 100 combatant vessels. However, the South Vietnamese economy was in a shambles after 20 years of war, and the government was rife with corruption.

The Paris Peace Accords called for all U.S. combat troops to be out of Vietnam within 60 days of signing. By 1974, the U.S. military presence was reduced to a small number of security personnel at U.S. consulates and at the U.S. embassy in Saigon and a small number of advisors assigned to the U.S. Defense Attaché Office (USDAO). These were augmented by about 8,500 U.S. civilian advisors, including about 5,000 U.S. civilians under contract to maintain South Vietnamese military equipment.

Despite the “peace accords,” fighting between Communist and government forces continued in both Laos and Cambodia. In Laos, the Pathet Lao continued to make gains against the Royal Lao Government. In Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge made major gains against the U.S.-backed government of Lon Nol, who had overthrown the monarchy of Prince Norodom Sihanouk in 1970. Neither government had the capacity to do anything about the blatant violation of territorial integrity by North Vietnamese forces along their respective borders with South Vietnam.

Several major events occurred in the U.S. that would affect the course of events in Vietnam. The resignation of President Richard Nixon due to the Watergate scandal is generally considered the most significant. Congress would later get blamed for cutting off funding for aid to South Vietnam—the reality was more nuanced; Congress cut the Nixon administration’s request for

1974–75 from \$1.45 billion to \$700 million, then refused President Gerald Ford’s request for an additional \$300 million. Nevertheless, the reduction in support (as opposed to “cut off”) did have detrimental effects on South Vietnamese military readiness. Another factor was the Case-Church Amendment, passed by Congress in June 1973 and signed by President Nixon on 1 July, which called for the cessation of funding for direct military involvement in Southeast Asia by August 1973. Another complicating factor was the War Powers Act, passed over President Nixon’s veto in 1973, which put significant restrictions on a president’s ability to wage war without Congressional approval. Although President Nixon and then Ford still had considerable ability to initiate combat operations if they so chose, the limits of the act versus presidential authority were as yet untested and resulted in significant ambiguity.

North Vietnamese Offensive, January to May 1975

After waiting “a decent interval,” the PAVN was ready to commence offensive operations, outside the areas they already held in South Vietnam, by the end of 1974. The plan for 1975 actually had limited objectives intended to set the stage for an all-out offensive in 1976. PAVN commanders were actually cautioned to avoid overextending themselves. Then, to everyone’s surprise (including the CIA and other U.S. intelligence agencies, and even the North Vietnamese themselves) the PAVN offensive quickly achieved “catastrophic success.” (To be fair, by late 1974, U.S. intelligence estimates were that the South Vietnamese government’s days were numbered, an assessment well understood at the senior levels of the U.S. government, but no one predicted just how fast the collapse would occur.) Planning for the large-scale evacuation of Americans and “at-risk” Vietnamese accelerated in earnest during 1974.

In January 1975, PAVN forces overran the entire province of Phuoc Long, located in the Central Highlands northwest of Saigon. After a pause to assess, on 10 March 1975, three PAVN divisions attacked the provincial capital of Ban Me Thuot in the Central Highlands south of Pleiku and west of Cam Ranh Bay. The ARVN commander in the region misjudged that Pleiku was the primary target and Ban Me Thuot a diversion. As a

result, the inadequate number of ARVN defenders put up a stiff fight, but overwhelming PAVN forces entered Ban Me Thuot on 12 March, although resistance continued until 18 March.

For reasons that aren't completely clear, the president of South Vietnam, Nguyen Van Thieu, ordered ARVN forces to withdraw from the Central Highlands and concentrate on defending more populous cities along the coast, blaming a loss of U.S. support. Unfortunately, the withdrawal became a rout as some ARVN units fought bravely while others dissolved through desertion. Refugees clogged the limited road networks, hampering ARVN movements. Over the next weeks, PAVN troops repeatedly flanked and cut off ARVN troops on the roads, and in the process many thousands of civilian refugees died in what became collectively known as the "convoy of tears" and the "convoy of death."

Sensing unexpected weakness, on 19 March, the PAVN initiated a second front south of the demilitarized zone (DMZ) in the northern part of South Vietnam. ARVN resistance collapsed, and within six days the PAVN had captured the old imperial capital city of Hue, which had been recaptured by U.S. Marines at great cost during the 1968 Viet Cong Tet Offensive.

By the end of March, North Vietnamese forces were in control of over a quarter of South Vietnam, inflicting over 150,000 casualties on the ARVN (6 of 13 ARVN divisions completely disintegrated). The VNAF lost over half of its combat aircraft, a number due to SA-7 shoulder-fired missiles. Over 500,000 South Vietnamese civilian refugees were on the move.

The ARVN attempt slow the PAVN advance from Hue toward Da Nang failed as PAVN forces repeatedly bypassed and then cut off pockets of resistance. The ARVN attempt to make a stand at Da Nang quickly collapsed as many thousands of refugees and deserters poured into the city and PAVN surrounded the city, cutting off any avenue of escape except by sea, and for a very limited number, by air.



Aerial view of Da Nang harbor, circa 1970 (NHHC NH 74512).

Evacuation of Da Nang

The evacuation of Da Nang was a horror show in which thousands of civilians died, including hundreds who drowned trying to reach boats offshore. Others were killed in the complete breakdown of law and order, including South Vietnamese troops who turned on each other. Others died as a result of PAVN artillery fire into masses of refugees.

U.S. and Vietnamese Navy ships made valiant efforts to save as many refugees from Da Nang as possible. Four MSC-controlled cargo ships, along with five chartered tugs and seven barges, were ordered to Da Nang. These vessels were all civilian crewed as the United States adhered to the Paris Peace Accords prohibition against U.S. combat forces in Vietnam. The evacuation was further hampered by dense fog and very low tides, requiring the ships to stand out fairly far and take on refugees in boat transfers.

Da Nang actually fell on 29 March, but refugees continued to reach the MSC ships by boat. On 29 March, USNS *Sgt. Andrew Miller* (T-AK-242) and chartered tug *Chitose Mare* departed Da Nang with over 10,100 aboard, destined for Cam Ranh Bay, further south. On 30 March, the MSC cargo ship *SS Pioneer* departed Da Nang with 8,000 aboard. By 31 March, the MSC cargo ships *SS Pioneer Contender* and *SS Transcolorado* along with three tugs took aboard a total of 34,600 refugees in a three-day period. The Vietnamese Navy did their best as well. An

LST (landing ship, tank) that normally carried a maximum of 1,000 personnel departed Da Nang with 6,000 aboard. The Vietnamese fleet command flagship, with a crew of 118, brought aboard 2,500 refugees.

During the offensive to Hue and Da Nang, at a cost of 9,000 killed or wounded, the PAVN inflicted 30,000 dead or wounded on the ARVN, with another 100,000 ARVN captured or deserted. The South Vietnamese lost 179 tanks and armored vehicles, 327 artillery pieces, 184 transport vehicles, and 47 naval craft, mostly all captured.

The transport of refugees to Cam Ranh Bay proved to be not far enough as PAVN forces drove down the coast about as fast as one could drive. The coastal city of Nha Trang fell on 1 April and Cam Ranh Bay on 3 April. On 1 April, the MSC cargo ship *SS Transcolorado* evacuated 7,000 people from Cam Ranh Bay. By 11 April, the five MSC-chartered and two U.S.-owned ships transported 113,000 refugees further south, where many were quickly overrun by advancing PAVN forces anyway.

Due to crowding and lack of any security, significant acts of violence occurred on some of the ships, to include murder, rape, and ad hoc tribunals of South Vietnamese soldiers executing their own officers. *SS Pioneer Contender* experienced a particularly shocking level of violence that ultimately resulted in South Vietnamese marines shooting rioters. *USNS Greenville Victory* (T-AK-237) had 10,000 people aboard. When some refugees (actually South Vietnamese Rangers) realized they were being taken to Phu Quoc, an island in the Gulf of Siam, they rioted and demanded to be taken to Vung Tau, closer to Saigon instead. The cruiser *USS Long Beach* (CGN-9) and destroyer escort *USS Reasoner* (DE-1063) responded to *Greenville's* distress, and U.S. Marines were put aboard to establish order. As a lesson learned, U.S. Marine detachments were put aboard all MSC-chartered and USNS ships after this.



Vice Admiral George P. Steele II, Commander Seventh Fleet. Here, he watches evacuation operations aboard *USS Blue Ridge* (LCC-19) during the fall of South Vietnam, 28 April 1975 (NHHC K-108275).

Preparations for the Evacuation of Saigon

Standing evacuation plans for Vietnam had existed for a long time, but there was a renewed push to refine them in 1974. What made planning so hard was the wide range of uncertainty as to how many people would need to be evacuated. By mid-April, the estimates of the number of potential evacuees ranged as high as 203,955 (an unusually precise number). During planning for the evacuation, there was concern whether there might be opposition from the North Vietnamese navy, particularly *Komar* missile boats with Styx anti-ship missiles. Despite the blatant violation of the Paris Peace Accords by the North Vietnamese, the U.S. continued to adhere to the provisions. The Chief of Naval Operations directed that the use of force be limited "to that required to protect and secure evacuation of U.S. nationals and protect lift assets." The experience of the MSC ships in the evacuation from Da Nang showed

that this rule would need to be “modified” to allow U.S. Marine detachments of 50 men on each of the ships, i.e., the Amphibious Evacuation Security Force, for which the need was a surprise.

On 29 March, the Commander in Chief, U.S. Pacific Fleet (CINCPACFLT), Admiral Maurice F. Weisner, was designated as the Vietnam refugee evacuation coordinator, although the U.S. ambassador to Vietnam, Graham A. Martin, was responsible for determining when to initiate an evacuation. Martin’s intent was to delay as long as possible and to keep preparations as secret as possible, so as not to induce panic in Saigon. Martin, and other diplomats, held out hope that there could still be a negotiated settlement and some form of shared power. The U.S. military leaders more rightly sensed that the PAVN was on a roll, and the North Vietnamese no longer interested in any negotiations.

Underneath the Commander in Chief, Pacific (CINCPAC), Admiral Noel Gayler, military operations within Vietnam related to evacuation were under the command of U.S. Air Force Lieutenant General John J. Burns, who was in command of the U.S. Support Activities Group (USSAG) based in Thailand, the remnant of the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV). Lieutenant General Burns was also commander of the Seventh Air Force, based in the Philippines. U.S. naval forces supporting an evacuation were under the Commander, U.S. Seventh Fleet, Vice Admiral George P. Steele, initially embarked on his flagship, the guided-missile light cruiser *Oklahoma City* (CLG-5), although he soon quickly found the relatively new amphibious command-and-control ship *Blue Ridge* (LCC-19) more to his liking (and to the consternation of the Marine Corps, *Blue Ridge* has been the Seventh Fleet flagship ever since *Oklahoma City* was decommissioned in 1979). Of note, Vice Admiral Steele was the son of Captain James M. Steel, commanding officer of the ex-battleship *Utah* (BB-31) when it was sunk during the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, 7 December 1941.

The commander of the Amphibious Task Force 76 (CTF-76) was Rear Admiral Donald Boone Whitmire. Whitmire graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy in 1946 (class of ’47), where he was the midshipman brigade commander and an All-American football player (at tackle). He was previously an All-American at the University of Alabama before enlisting in the Marine Corps in 1942 and then

attending the Naval Academy—he was one of only four college football players to be All-American at two different colleges, and he was inducted into the College Football Hall of Fame in 1956. After graduation, he served in and commanded submarines, as well as commanding a troop transport earlier in the Vietnam War.

The primary U.S. Marine Corps element was the 9th Amphibious Brigade under the command of Brigadier General Richard E. Carey, which included Regimental Landing Team 4. The brigade moved from Japan to Okinawa in March, before moving to Subic Bay, Philippines, the second week of April and embarking on amphibious command-and-control ship *Blue Ridge*.

The nuclear-powered attack carrier *Enterprise* (CVA[N]-65) was nearing the end of its deployment, and its return to the states was put on hold. As a result, four carriers would be on station in the Western Pacific/South China Sea at the end of March rather than the usual three. There were also two amphibious squadrons rather than the usual one, augmented by eight ships operating under the control of the Military Sea Lift Command (renamed from the Military Sea Transportation Service in 1970).

Midway (CVB-41) had been directed to offload half of its air wing at Subic Bay, Philippines, and the remainder were all struck below when the carrier arrived off Thailand and took aboard eight U.S. Air Force (USAF) H-53 helicopters of the 21st Special Operations Squadron and two HH-53 of the 40th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron. Because USAF H-53 variants did not have folding rotor blades, the 10 USAF helos took up all the flight deck space on *Midway*. Along with *Hancock* (CVA-19), this was the first time USAF H-53 helicopters operated from a U.S. Navy aircraft carrier and engendered a degree of controversy at the time due to the need to offload the carrier air wing (half in the case of *Midway* and the entire wing in the case of *Hancock*). (Use of aircraft carriers for Army helicopter operations would be repeated in 1994 by *Dwight D. Eisenhower* (CVN-69) and *America* (CV-66) in Operation Uphold Democracy (Haiti intervention) and again by *Kitty Hawk* (CV-63) during the first months of Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan.)

Hancock, commanded by Captain Frederick Fellows, deployed from San Francisco Bay on 18 March. Upon arrival at Pearl Harbor, the “Hannah” took aboard 300 marine infantry and 16 CH-53 Sea Stallion heavy-lift helicopters of Marine Heavy Helicopter Squadron 463 (HMH-463). Upon arrival at Subic Bay on 6 April, the ship offloaded the entire air wing (Carrier Air Wing 21 [CVW-21]) and brought aboard CH-46s of HMM-164 and HMM-165, along with AH-1J attack helicopters and UH-1 utility helicopters of HML-367, as well as 500 more marines. The hangar deck was also packed with supplies for refugees. *Hancock* then joined Amphibious Ready Group (ARG) Bravo standing by off Vung Tau, South Vietnam.

Operation Eagle Pull, 12 April 1975

We interrupt the evacuation of South Vietnam to conduct an evacuation of Cambodia. By 1975, Communist Khmer Rouge forces had overrun most of the country, except for the capital city of Phnom Penh. By January, the Khmer Rouge gained control of both banks of the Mekong River downstream from Phnom Penh, cutting off the last avenue of supply. In late January, only seven vessels of a 16-ship convoy survived the 62-mile gauntlet from the South Vietnamese border. On 3 February, ships in a downstream convoy hit mines. By this time the Khmer (Cambodian) National Navy had lost a quarter of its 178 vessels (mostly riverine craft) and suffered 70 percent of its personnel killed or wounded. With the river route cut off, the city was doomed, as was the government of Cambodia.

By February 1975, the writing was on the wall, and the United States hastened to refine long-standing noncombatant evacuation operation (NEO) plans. As was typical of any NEO, planning was complicated by uncertainty regarding how many people would need to be evacuated. Official U.S. personnel were easy enough to count, but other Americans as well as host-country and third-country nationals were much more difficult to predict, and projections bounced from 666 to 1172 (both numbers suggesting a level of precision that did not exist).

On 3 March 1975, ARG Alpha (Task Group 76.4) with the 31st Marine Amphibious Unit (MAU) (Task Group 79.4) arrived off the Cambodian port of Kompong Som (formerly Sihanoukville) on the Gulf of Siam. The ARG consisted of amphibious assault ship *Okinawa* (LPH-3) commanded by Captain Charles J. Moore, amphibious transport dock *Vancouver* (LPD-2), and dock landing ship *Thomaston* (LSD-28). Providing cover for the force was destroyer *Edson* (DD-946), guided-missile destroyer *Henry B. Wilson* (DDG-7), and destroyer escorts *Knox* (DE-1052), *Kirk* (DE 1087), and *Cook* (DE-1083). (Destroyer escorts would be redesignated as frigates [FF] in June 1975.)

Okinawa embarked HMH-462, whose 12 CH-53D Sea Stallion helicopters would be the primary evacuation element, as the distance from Phnom Penh to the sea was less than to Thailand. *Okinawa* also embarked three CH-46 Sea Knight medium-lift helicopters, four AH-1J Cobra attack helicopters, and two UH-1E “Huey” utility helicopters. In addition, *Okinawa* had 350 marines of the 31st MAU (from Battalion Landing Team (BLT) 2/4). Also in support of the evacuation were 20 U.S. Air Force HH-53 “Jolly Green Giant” combat rescue heavy-lift helicopters based in Thailand.

To augment ARG Alpha, the attack carrier *Hancock* was quickly shifted from ARG Bravo off Vung Tau, Vietnam, to ARG Alpha in the Gulf of Siam on 11 April.

The Khmer Rouge had taken heavy casualties in frontal assaults on Phnom Penh (which is why they shifted to choking off the river supply route), but by mid-April, the government defenses were starting to crumble. On 11 April, the U.S. ambassador to Cambodia, John Gunter Dean, gave the order to execute the evacuation the next day.

At 0600 on 12 April, *Okinawa* began launching 12 CH-53D helos, which then picked up marines from *Okinawa* and *Vancouver*. The helos departed in three waves with a 360-man marine ground-security force embarked, crossing the coastline at 0743. The first U.S. helicopters into Phnom Penh were three USAF HH-53Cs from Thailand, which inserted a team of combat air controllers while a HC-130P Combat King airborne command post orbited overhead. The helos encountered no opposition on the way from the sea to Phnom Penh, and the first arrived at about 0845.

Once the marines established a security perimeter around the LZ, a soccer field about 3,000 feet from the embassy, the evacuation commenced. The last estimate was to expect 590 evacuees. As it turned out, many potential evacuees had departed before the airport had been shut down on 10 April due to intense Khmer Rouge artillery and rocket fire. (President Lon Nol had fled to the United States via Indonesia on 1 April.) As a result, the total number of evacuees on the marine helos was only 289 (146 U.S. nationals and 205 Cambodian and third-country nationals), including the U.S. ambassador, embassy staff, the acting president of Cambodia (Saukam Khoy, who departed without telling other senior Cambodian leaders), and other Cambodian nationals and families, as well as 36 U.S. and foreign journalists (12 from neutral and friendly countries). A number of senior Cambodian officials refused the offer of evacuation, which would be a fatal decision. By 1041, all evacuees had departed and were back aboard ship by noon, again without any opposition.

As soon as the *Okinawa* helicopters with the evacuees departed, helicopters from *Hancock* then arrived and extracted the marine security force. At 1050, 107-millimeter rocket fire began impacting near the LZ. At 1059, the last marines were lifted out, and a minute later 82-millimeter mortar rounds began impacting. It is likely that the Khmer Rouge allowed the evacuation phase to take place without interference. The air controllers on the ground notified the USAF forward air controllers (FAC) orbiting overhead in OV-10 Broncos, but the FACs could not identify the source of the incoming fire. At 1115, two USAF HH-53s extracted the combat air control team and the Eagle Pull command element (which had arrived on 3 April) with one helo suffering minor damage. Another HH-53 that was conducting a precautionary search-and-rescue orbit north of Phnom Penh was hit by a machine-gun round in the tail rotor but arrived in Thailand safely.

During Operation Eagle Pull, helicopters from *Okinawa* and *Hancock* flew 99 missions without firing a shot. On 13 April, all the evacuees aboard ship were flown by helicopter to Thailand. Operation Eagle Pull was executed almost flawlessly and was considered a success. It certainly saved the lives of the Cambodians who were evacuated. Five days later, Phnom Penh fell to the Khmer Rouge, who then proceeded to execute anyone

who had anything to do with the Cambodian government. As many as 3 million Cambodians were killed or died (40 percent of the population) between 1975 and 1979 under the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime of Prime Minister Pol Pot. (See the 1984 movie *Killing Fields* for a pretty accurate portrayal of the evacuation and the horror that followed.)

The End Nears for the Republic of Vietnam, April 1975

On 8 April, a Vietnam Air Force F-5E Tiger fighter jet flown by a defector pilot bombed and strafed the presidential palace in Saigon before recovering at a North Vietnamese-held airfield, furthering the impression in Washington that the situation in Vietnam was turning into a disaster. The next day, President Ford held a meeting with the National Security Council to discuss evacuation. (By this time, the original name of Talon Vise had been changed to Frequent Wind due to a compromise.)

As surprised as anyone by the success of the offensive, the Politburo in Hanoi gave orders in late March to accelerate before the rainy season started. However, as the North Vietnamese approached Saigon, ARVN resistance stiffened and stopped the North Vietnamese on 9 April at Xuan Loc, about 35 miles northeast of Saigon. However, after heroic resistance, the ARVN was further demoralized when South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu resigned on 21 April. In his farewell speech, Thieu denounced the United States for failing to come to the aid of South Vietnam. The PAVN broke through Xuan Loc on 22 April.

Air Evacuation of Saigon, April 1975

Of the four major evacuation plan options, all called for getting as many people as possible out on commercial and military fixed-wing aircraft, with Tan Son Nhut just outside Saigon as the primary airfield. On 3 April 1975, President Ford announced that U.S. Military Airlift Command (MAC) would begin airlifting Vietnamese orphans out of Tan Son Nhut, designated Operation Babylift.

On 4 April, the first Babylift flight, a USAF C-5A Galaxy with 250 orphans aboard, suffered an explosive decom-

pression not long after takeoff. Despite heroic airman-ship by the flight crew, the large transport made a semicontrolled crash landing short of the runway at Ton Son Nhut. Of those on board, 176 survived and 138 were killed, including 78 children, 35 Defense Attaché Office (DAO) Saigon personnel, and 11 USAF personnel. U.S. Navy ships searched for the flight data recorder in the South China Sea, which was located and recovered by rescue and salvage ship *Deliver* (ARS-23). The rear hatch, found by fleet tug *Abnaki* (ATF-96), showed the crash was the result of the failure of locks on the rear loading ramp and not sabotage.

Despite the tragic start, over 3,300* Vietnamese orphans were subsequently airlifted to safety (by C-141) in the United States and other countries by way of the Navy Regional Medical Center on Guam. *This number varies from 2,600 to 2,900 to 3,300 depending on the source.

The formal start of the USAF fixed-wing airlift commenced on 18 April, but 4,000 Americans had already departed. By 19 April, 6,000 people had been airlifted on USAF aircraft. The rate accelerated as the North Vietnamese closed in, with 20 C-141 flights departing every day and 20 C-130 flights departing every night. By the end of April, 201 C-141 and 174 C-130 flights had airlifted 45,000 people, including 5,600 U.S. citizens. Including commercial flights (banned by the Federal Aviation Administration on 25 April), 50,493 people were evacuated by air

Seventh Fleet Assets Move into Position, 19–25 April 1975

By 19 April, *Coral Sea* (CVA-43), *Enterprise*, *Hancock*, *Midway*, and *Okinawa* had all received orders to proceed to waters off Vietnam. *Hancock* had just arrived in Singapore for a liberty call following the completion of Eagle Pull but within hours of arrival sortied along with destroyer escort *Kirk* and *Cook* back to station off South Vietnam.

By 21 April, major elements of the Seventh Fleet were concentrated off Vung Tau (the entrance to the river passage to Saigon), including the fleet flagship guided-missile light cruiser *Oklahoma* and eight destroyers; at the highest point there were 46 ships in support of the

operation. CTF-76, embarked on *Blue Ridge* under Rear Admiral Whitmire, had 15 amphibious ships, plus attack carriers and *Midway*, both configured as helicopter carriers for Operation Frequent Wind, operating about 30–50 miles south of Vung Tau. The amphibious ships included *Mount Vernon* (LSD-39), *Barbour County* (LST-1195), and *Tuscaloosa* (LST-1187), with the 9th Marine Amphibious Brigade (Task Group 79.1) embarked with three battalion landing teams, four helicopter squadrons, support units, and deployed afloat marine security detachments.

Helicopter assets for Operation Frequent Wind included a total of 46 CH-53, 32 CH-46, 8 AH-1J, and 6 UH-1E dispersed as follows (some of these numbers vary in different accounts):

Hancock (CVA-19)—16 CH-53D and 16 CH-46D/F of HMH-462 and 4 AH-1J and 2 UH-1E of HML-367. One CH-46 would be lost with two aviators

Okinawa (LPH-3)—18 CH-53D of HMH-463 and 4 AH-1J and 3 UH-1E of HML-369. One AH-1J would be lost, with both aviators rescued

Vancouver (LPD-2)—3 CH-46D of HMM-165

Dubuque (LPD-8)—7 CH-46D of HMM-165 (reinforced)

Blue Ridge (LCC-19)—1 CH-46D and 2 UH-1E of HMM-165

Anchorage (LSD-36)—3 CH-46D of HML-367

Duluth (LPD-6)—2 CH-46D of HML-367

Denver (LPD-9)—2 CH-53

Midway (CVA-41)—3 USAF HH-53 and 8 USAF H-53

At Tan Son Nhut were 28 Bell 205d/UH-1D of Air America (CIA). In addition, P-3B Orion aircraft of Patrol Squadron 19 (VP-19) operated out of Naval Air Station (NAS) Cubi Point, Philippines, in support of the operations.

To provide air cover for the evacuation, Task Force 77 (TF-77) included the attack carriers *Enterprise* and *Coral*

Sea. Enterprise embarked Carrier Air Wing 14 (CVW-14), which included Fighter Squadron 1 (VF-1), VF-2, Attack Squadron 27 (VA-27), VA-97, VA-196, Electronic Attack Squadron 137 (VAQ-137), Carrier Airborne Early Warning Squadron (VAW-113), Reconnaissance Attack Squadron 12 (RVAH-12), Helicopter Antisubmarine Squadron 2 (HS-2), and Fleet Air Reconnaissance Squadron 1 (VQ-1) Detachment 65. One VA-27 A-7E Corsair II was lost to unknown operational cause. *Coral Sea* embarked Carrier Air Wing 15 (CVW-15), which included VF-51, VF-111, VA-22, VA-94, VA-95, Carrier Airborne Early Warning Training Squadron 110 (RVAW-110) Detachment 3, Light Photographic Squadron 63 (VFP-63) Detachment 5, and HC-1 Detachment 2.

On 24 April, the U.S. Navy and U.S. Air Force conducted an airstrike on a North Vietnamese convoy suspected of transporting SA-2 surface-to-air missiles to the vicinity of Saigon, which would have significantly increased the threat. The strike was secret at the time but intended as a warning to the North Vietnamese. Any Navy jets involved would have been from *Enterprise* or *Coral Sea*.

PAVN Encircles Saigon

By 25 April, PAVN forces effectively had Saigon surrounded, and on 27 April commenced shelling the city, which had largely been spared violence throughout the war. On 28 April, PAVN cut the last ground route out of Saigon. PAVN also began infiltrating troops in civilian clothes intermingled with refugees entering the city.

At about 1800 on 28 April, five A-37 Dragonfly aircraft bombed Tan Son Nhut. The aircraft had been captured from South Vietnam at Da Nang and Pleiku. The lead aircraft was flown by the same defector who had bombed the presidential palace on 8 May while the other aircraft were flown by North Vietnamese pilots who had received crash-course training in the A-37 and one other defector. The North Vietnamese claimed 24 aircraft destroyed on the ground, including three F-5 fighters, four C-119 transports, three C-47 transports, and one DC-3 transport, along with 200 South Vietnamese killed. U.S. sources reported three AC-119 gunships and several C-47s destroyed. The attack resulted in a temporary closure of the airfield.



South Vietnamese refugees on the deck of USS *Blue Ridge* (LCC-19) during evacuation operations, 28 April 1975. The man clad in the light-colored jumpsuit appears to be former South Vietnamese Vice President and air force General Nguyen Cao Ky (NHHC K-108273).

The evacuation got off to an unexpected start when just after dusk on 28 April a South Vietnamese CH-47 Chinook helicopter landed on *Blue Ridge*, quite by surprise as the crew scrambled to flight quarters. Out of the helicopter came 20 Vietnamese, including two women with babies. The pilot, a Vietnamese lieutenant, stated all the majors and colonels had fled, so he figured it was time to get out. This was not according to the plan, but it was a portent of what would follow the next day.

On the night of 28 April, PAVN artillery began shelling Tan Son Nhut. During the night of 28/29 April, one AC-119 dropped flares and fired on PAVN forces approaching the airfield. At dawn, two A-1 Skyraiders patrolled the perimeter of Tan Son Nhut until one was shot down, probably by an SA-7. At 0700, the AC-119 was firing on PAVN formations when it was shot down by an SA-7. At dawn on 29 April, at least 74 South Viet-

namese planes began fleeing Tan Son Nhut to U-Tapao Royal Thai Navy Airfield, including 30 F-5 fighters, A-37s, and various transports, while as many as 100 UH-1 helos started heading east toward the sea.

Prior to dawn on 29 April, three USAF C-130 transports landed at Tan Son Nhut. One of the C-130s was about to load passengers when it was hit in a barrage of PAVN artillery and rocket fire. The C-130 burned and was destroyed, although the crew escaped and would fly out on one of the other C-130s. These would be the last U.S. fixed-wing flights out of Tan Son Nhut, although Ambassador Martin insisted seeing the damage for himself before he would authorize a shift to helicopter evacuation—Option IV of the Frequent Wind plan. The primary helicopter extraction point was the DAO compound at Tan Son Nhut.

On the afternoon of 28 April, 40 marines off Hancock flew in to reinforce the security guards at the DAO compound. In the early morning of 29 April, two of these marines were killed by rocket fire; Corporal Charles McMahon Jr. and Lance Corporal Darwin D. Judge are considered the last uniformed Americans to die in combat in the Vietnam War, of over 58,000.

Also on 29 April, the South Vietnamese government completely collapsed. The commander of the South Vietnamese air force, General Tran Vin Minh, arrived at Tan Son Nhut with 30 of his staff, demanding to be evacuated. A number of other senior South Vietnamese officers chose to commit suicide.

That morning, *Peoria* (LST-1183) and *Barbour County* were directed to take station off Vung Tau to serve as emergency landing pads for helicopters. *Cochrane* (DDG-21) provided protection to the LSTs and forward air traffic control services. The MSC cargo ship *SS Pioneer Commander* also was assigned to this group to pick up evacuees leaving by way of Vung Tau, however PAVN had cut the road between Vung Tau and Saigon.

Even before the evacuation officially began, the former prime minister of South Vietnam (and former chief of the Air Force), Nguyen Cao Ky, took off in a UH-1 along with his wife and the U.S. ambassador's wife, Dorothy Martin. An accomplished pilot, Ky landed on Denver. He was subsequently transferred by helicopter to *Midway*

and then to *Blue Ridge* (resulting in confusing accounts of what ship he landed on, and whether he flew his own helo or was in an Air America or Navy helo).

Operation Frequent Wind Commences, 29 April 1975

Finally, at 1108 Saigon time, President Gerald Ford announced the execution of Operation Frequent Wind. Due to communications challenges between the USAF airborne command post and *Blue Ridge*, possibly caused by PAVN jamming, execution didn't start until the afternoon with the first launch of helicopters from *Hancock* and *Okinawa* between 1230 and 1244. The initial waves of 36 CH-53 and CH-46 helicopters transported 865 marines of the 2nd Battalion, 4th Marines, to provide a ground security force at the DAO compound. Upon arrival, the marines stopped some rogue South Vietnamese paratroopers from interfering.

At noon, U.S. armed forces radio broadcast that the temperature in Saigon was "105 degrees and rising" and then began playing "White Christmas" by Bing Crosby. This was the last call signal for people to report to their evacuation locations. USAF fighters launched from Thailand to augment air cover provided by TF-77 carrier aircraft. A USAF Lockheed EC-130 airborne battlefield command-and-control center orbited throughout the day over Saigon, providing radio relay from the DAO compound at Tan Son Nhut to the TF-76 flagship *Blue Ridge* (LCC-19). An HC-130P Combat King search-and-rescue command post/tanker also remained in the air over Saigon, along with AC-130 gunships, which orbited on call.

Air America helicopters began picking up people (mostly CIA assets and family) from isolated locations around the city (resulting in one of the most famous photographs of the operation, frequently misidentified as the roof of the U.S. embassy). The Air America helos then delivered the personnel to the DAO compound for further evacuation.

While fighting was raging all around Tan Son Nhut, the continual flow of U.S. Marine and USAF helicopters from ship to shore evacuated groups so efficiently that the operation was actually running ahead of schedule,

until an early evening rainstorm temporarily halted operations. In the end, 395 U.S. nationals plus 4,475 other refugees were airlifted out of the DAO compound by about 2100, destined for the ships. Among the last marines out was Colonel Alfred M. Gray, commander of the 4th Marines (and future commandant of the Marine Corps), who oversaw the destruction of the DAO compound, the satellite communications station, and the former residence of General Creighton Abrams for good measure. (Abrams was commander of military operations in Vietnam from 1968 to 1972.)

U.S. Embassy Evacuation, 29–30 April

Although the airlift from the DAO compound at Tan Son Nhut went relatively smoothly, the evacuation from the U.S. embassy fit the category of “no plan survives contact with the enemy.” Ambassador Martin had indicated that only two Air America helicopters would be needed to evacuate about 100 personnel and planned accordingly. As it turned out, the two Air America helicopters were “unavailable,” being delayed by picking up people around the city. In addition, the number of people needing evacuation was about 2,500 (many Vietnamese embassy staff and their families), and the LZ on the embassy rooftop could not support CH-53s. Advance team personnel had tried to get the ambassador’s approval to cut down a large tamarind tree so a parking lot could be used as an additional LZ capable of a CH-53. The ambassador had declined as that would have been an obvious indicator to the people of Saigon that a U.S. pullout was imminent.

Quickly adapting, two marine CH-46s, two medevac helos, and two helicopter gunships were diverted to the embassy, with a 40-man marine quick-reaction platoon and an LZ control team. This was augmented by another two marine platoons with 130 additional men. The evacuation dragged on into the night, hampered by heavy cloud cover and the same torrential rain that had hit Tan Son Nhut. Ambassador Martin finally gave permission to cut down the tree. He also directed that the helos take three Vietnamese for every one American.

At this point, events in Washington began to drive events in Vietnam due to President Ford’s desire to go on television to announce that the last Americans were

out of Vietnam. To the President and Secretary of State Kissinger’s mounting frustration, any such announcement kept getting delayed from noon Eastern Standard Time into the late afternoon, threatening to go into the evening. At this point, Martin received word that the President had authorized only 19 more helo flights, and the ambassador was ordered to be on the last one. As the evacuation continued to drag on, more 8,000-mile screwdriver orders from Washington came: helicopters were to take only maximum passengers and no baggage, and then only U.S. citizens and ground security forces.

At 0458 on 30 April, Saigon time, CH-46 *Lady Ace* 09 with Code 2 (the ambassador) aboard lifted off from the embassy rooftop, arriving at *Blue Ridge* at 0547. The timing of the U.S. President’s announcement resulted in 400 Vietnamese (and a number of South Korean) embassy personnel and families left behind, who could have been airlifted out with six more CH-53s. Also, there were still 11 U.S. Marines on the rooftop after the President announced to the world that all Americans were out. Another CH-46 (*Swift* 2-2 of HMM-164) escorted by two AH-1J attack helos had to go in to extract the marines, and it wasn’t until 0747 that the ground security force was accounted for and out of Vietnam. Not long afterwards, a North Vietnamese tank famously crashed through the gate of the presidential palace. The last marines recovered on *Okinawa*, although one of the AH-1s ran out of fuel and ditched, with both aircrew recovered safely by *Kirk*.

Within two hours after the marines were out, North Vietnamese troops were marching into Saigon. Acting President Duong Van Minh announced the unconditional surrender of the Republic of Vietnam.

Flying Circus at Sea, 29 April

On the morning of 29 April, as the ships of TF-76 were standing ready to commence launching the helicopter evacuation, as many as 100 South Vietnamese helicopters packed with refugees, including families of the aircrew, were heading out to sea in an attempt to reach the U.S. ships. This had not actually been envisioned as part of the planning for Frequent Wind. Soon, U.S. ships were being swarmed by Vietnamese helicopters at the

same time that they were trying to conduct their own helicopter operations. Few, if any, of the Vietnamese helicopters had the ability to communicate by radio with U.S. ships, so virtually everything was done by hand signal. Initial direction to turn Vietnamese helicopters away quickly fell by the wayside as Vietnamese pilots didn't understand or chose to ignore directions and landed on ships anyway.

The danger became apparent on *Blue Ridge*, commanded by Captain William Daniel Hart, when five Vietnamese and two Air America helicopters sought to land at about the same time. An Air America helo was cleared in first, but before it could be moved, a large CH-47 Chinook landed with inadequate space, and the blades collided sending flying metal around the aft end of the ship, miraculously without injuring anyone. As the CH-47 teetered on the edge, a large number of crying women and children poured out. Over the course of the day, about 15 helicopters landed on *Blue Ridge*, which were shoved over the side after passengers were taken off. One Air America pilot attempted to ditch alongside, but after the pilot jumped, the helo crashed into the side of the ship, fortunately with minimal damage to *Blue Ridge*.

Hancock took aboard 13 Vietnamese helos on the morning of 29 April with 141 refugees, mostly families of the pilots, while conducting its own intense helicopter operations. *Hancock* would eventually have over 2,000 refugees transferred from other ships.

By midafternoon, *Midway* had recovered about 45 South Vietnamese helicopters while operating the 10 USAF helicopters. Communications with the USAF helos went very well, but it was a completely different story with the Vietnamese helos. Six Vietnamese helicopters were pushed over the side to clear a path for an O-1 Bird Dog single-engine fixed-wing plane with a family on board. Five other orbiting Vietnamese helos took that opportunity to land, and they were pushed overboard after the occupants were safe. The O-1 made a near-perfect landing in one of the most dramatic events of the day, saving the life of the pilot, his wife, and five children (including an infant), who almost certainly would have died had the plane ditched in the water. By the end of the day, *Midway* had three South Vietnamese CH-47s, 40 UH-1s, the Cessna O-1 Bird Dog,

and five Air America UH-1 "Hueys" in addition to the USAF helicopters (and half its air wing struck below).

At one point *Duluth* was swarmed by helicopters, taking aboard and jettisoning seven UH-1s in quick succession. One of the UH-1s was crammed with 50 people, mostly women and small children.

During the day, destroyer escort *Kirk* had taken aboard 14 Vietnamese UH-1 "Hueys," one after the other, jettisoning all but three of them over the side to make room for the next. A Vietnamese CH-47 was too large to land on *Kirk* but was able to lower all passengers, including women, children and infants, and aircrewmembers to *Kirk's* crew; the CH-47 pilot then ditched the helo, jumping to safety at the last moment. Ironically, a number of *Kirk's* crewmen jumped in the water to try to rescue passengers on the CH-47, not realizing that all the passengers were already aboard *Kirk*; the sailors in turn were then rescued. At the end, *Kirk* took aboard almost 200 Vietnamese refugees.

During the course of the day, U.S. ships took aboard 41 South Vietnamese helicopters and jettisoned another 54. Many helos were forced to ditch due to a lack of fuel or space. U.S. ships made valiant efforts save as many people as possible who went in the water, but an unknown number of refugees were lost. Other helos missed the ships and were lost at sea.



Crewmen of USS *Blue Ridge* (LCC-19) carry two Vietnamese children after they arrived on board by helicopter on 29 April 1975 (NHHC USN 711642).

After the Helos, Then the Boats

Although the dramatic helicopter operation got most of the attention, the greatest number of Vietnamese refugees came by sea. Virtually every watercraft that could move in the Port of Saigon got underway for the open sea, including many unseaworthy makeshift craft that would result in the deaths of their occupants. Many refugees came out on barges towed by the five MSC-chartered tugs; one barge had an estimated 6,000 people on board and the others approximately the same.

The rules of engagement for U.S. Navy ships did not allow approach closer than one mile to shore. This did not apply to the civilian-manned MSC ships, which did however have marine security detachments aboard. The MSC-chartered cargo ships *SS Green Wave*, *SS Pioneer Commander*, *SS Pioneer Contender*, and *SS Green Forest* went into Saigon and embarked thousands of refugees.

Peoria and *Barbour County*, along with USNS ships *Greenville Victory*, *Sgt. Andrew Miller*, and *Sgt. Truma Kimbro* (T-AK-244) and *SS Green Port* and *SS America Challenger* waited off Vung Tau, joined by *SS Pioneer Contractor* coming from the Philippines. North Vietnamese artillery began impacting near Vung Tau, with the closest rounds hitting about a mile from *Peoria*. The guided-missile destroyer *Henry B. Wilson* (DDG-7) responded to the call and went to general quarters, which appeared to be sufficient to make the artillery stop.

Sgt. Andrew Miller was taking on over 6,000 refugees when a South Vietnamese helicopter crashed into a barge alongside, injuring a number of refugees. Shortly afterwards, a vessel with Vietnamese aboard attempted to come alongside but was waved off. The vessel responded with small-arms fire directed at *Sgt. Andrew Miller* and attempted to ram. *Henry B. Wilson* trained its guns at the bridge of the ship, which then chose to go elsewhere.

In another water evacuation, the American counsel general at Can Tho (up the Mekong Delta) chose to evacuate by boat down the Bassac River rather than by air. This turned into a 16-hour ordeal as the boat was harassed by small-arms and rocket fire before reaching *Barbour County* and *Pioneer Contender* on 30 May.

On 30 May, the ships off the coast were directed to move 20 miles out, but the stream of small boats continued. *Greenville Victory* had taken aboard 5,400 refugees, and the other MSC ships had similar numbers. A South Korean LST (117) took aboard 3,000.

By dusk on 2 May, the ships of TF-76 had an estimated 6,000 refugees on board, while the MSC flotilla had an estimated 44,000. At this point, the MSC ships split into three groups based on speed and began heading for the Philippines and Guam.

In an example of the scale and intensity of operations, *Okinawa* logged more than 1,000 landings and departures during the 30 hours the ship was at flight quarters, all while processing 1,200 refugees. *Denver* brought 500 refugees aboard while processing 7,500 for transfer to other ships. *Vancouver* took aboard 2,200 refugees. Numerous Navy ships had many refugees on board rescued from the hundreds of small boats.

Republic of Vietnam Navy Exodus

Another surprise event was the departure of virtually the entire South Vietnamese navy rather than its surrender. The South Vietnamese navy had suffered an 80 percent budget cut since 1973, with only 31 of 45 larger vessels capable of operations. This included one destroyer escort, six former U.S. Coast Guard cutters, five minesweepers and patrol craft, 14 landing craft, and five oilers.

On 29 April, 26 Vietnamese Navy ships and vessels left the port of Saigon, loaded with 30,000 personnel, including about 10,000 family members. Accompanying the Vietnamese flotilla were four Cambodian ships, two Republic of China (Taiwan) LSTs, one Republic of Korea (South) LST, and about 500 fishing boats, all crammed with refugees. The Vietnamese Navy chief of naval operations, Vice Admiral Tran Van Chon, refused to evacuate and chose to fight on. He would be captured and subjected to 10 years of "reeducation."

The mass exodus of the South Vietnamese navy came as a surprise to Navy commanders and to *Kirk*, commanded by Commander Paul H. Jacobs, on station off the entrance to the Saigon River. Former U.S. Navy

officer Richard Armitage (USNA '67), with three combat tours in Vietnam, was assigned to the DAO in Vietnam and played a major role in organizing the Vietnam Navy for departure. Armitage was then flown out to *Blue Ridge* and transferred to *Kirk* with orders to rendezvous with the South Vietnamese flagship, RVNS *Tran Nhat Duat* (HQ-03). *Kirk* assisted with a sinking Vietnamese LSM (landing ship, medium) and provided extensive aid to Vietnamese civilians aboard the ships. After a rendezvous with other Vietnamese vessels at Con Son Island, about 32 Vietnamese vessels were considered seaworthy. While embarked on *Kirk*, Armitage personally made a decision to lead the flotilla to Subic Bay against the wishes of both the Philippine and U.S. governments. (Armitage would go on to hold senior U.S. government positions including deputy secretary of state during the administration of President George W. Bush.)

The commander of Destroyer Squadron 23, Commodore Donald "Pete" Roane, embarked on *Kirk* to lead the flotilla to the Philippines. *Kirk* was joined by *Cook* (DE-1083), *Tuscaloosa* (LST-1187), *Deliver* (ARS-23), *Abnaki* (ATF-96), and USNS *Lipán* (T-ATF-85) escorting the Vietnamese flotilla. The group had to hold up for a day as diplomatic negotiations for Philippine approval proved contentious.

On 7 May, marine security teams boarded the South Vietnamese vessels and disarmed the crews, a condition of the Philippine government for entry. In a ceremony at noon, the Republic of Vietnam flags were hauled down and replaced with the flag of the United States. The acting chief of naval operations of the Vietnamese Navy handed over command to Commodore Roane. As the ships were now technically in the U.S. Navy, the Republic of the Philippines allowed them to enter Subic Bay. (The story of *Kirk* and Armitage is probably worth a separate H-gram article, or a passing note as Armitage just died on 13 April.)

Afterward

During Frequent Wind, *Midway* took aboard just over 3,000 refugees; most were quickly offloaded to other ships. *Midway* then proceeded to a position off Thailand to offload the 10 USAF H-53 helos to U-Tapao. USAF helos delivered to *Midway* numerous South Vietnamese aircraft that had flown to Thailand. *Midway* took aboard



Subic Bay, Philippines, 31 May 1975: Former South Vietnamese and Cambodian navy ships tied up at buoy no. 1 after bringing in refugees. They are (left to right): Vietnamese ships HQ-471, *Dong Da II* (07), *Chi Lang II* (08), *Chi Linh* (11); Cambodian ships P-112 and E-312 (NHHC K-109092).

24 F-5 Tiger fighter jets, 27 A-37 Dragonfly light attack aircraft, and 50 more helicopters in addition to the 39 still aboard (24 Vietnamese and 14 Air America). Two F-5s slipped from their sling and were lost in the water. *Midway* then sailed for Guam, where it offloaded most of the Vietnamese aircraft in 24 hours.

U.S. Navy facilities on Guam cared for and processed 50,430 Vietnamese refugees by 13 May as part of Operation New Life. Ultimately, over 138,000 Vietnamese would reach freedom in the United States; 110,000 through Guam. (I'm not really doing justice to this effort either, maybe next H-gram.)

Losses

During Operation Frequent Wind, two U.S. helicopters were lost. The last AH-1J Cobra out of Saigon had insufficient fuel to reach *Okinawa* and attempted to land on destroyer escort *Kirk*, but the helo deck was fouled by an Air America UH-1. The Cobra ditched and both aircrew were rescued by *Kirk*'s motor whaleboat.

Another U.S. loss was a Marine Corps CH-46 SAR helo that crashed near *Hancock*. Captain William C. Nystul and First Lieutenant Michael J. Shea both perished and are considered the last U.S. aviators lost in the Vietnam War.

From TF-77, *Enterprise* lost one A-7E Corsair II overwater to an undetermined cause, but the pilot was rescued. *Enterprise* flew 95 combat air patrol sorties, including 20 by VF-1 and VF-2 F-14A Tomcats, which were considered the first combat operations by the new F-14 (this was their first deployment).

A number of evacuation helicopters were hit by small-arms ground fire from angry South Vietnamese troops, but none were seriously damaged. Only two marines suffered noncombat injuries during the evacuation itself. Although about a dozen shoulder-launched SA-7 surface-to-air missiles were fired in the vicinity of U.S. helicopters, none hit, although several escaping Vietnamese helicopters were brought down. The North Vietnamese forces were actually under orders not to oppose the evacuation so as not to provoke U.S. intervention, but there is always someone who doesn't get the word. At one point North Vietnamese radar illuminated a USAF jet near Tan San Nhut and then opened fire with 57-milimeter antiaircraft guns. The USAF responded with AGM-45 Shrike antiradiation missiles and four cluster bombs, which ended the threat—believed to be the last U.S. combat action of the Vietnam War.

Afterthought

A number of refugees aboard *Kirk* had brought their pets. Commander Jacobs received an order “to get rid of all the animals.” He recalled, “They wanted me to take the pets from the kids and throw them over the side. So the XO said, ‘What do you wanna do, Captain?’ I replied, ‘You answer the message. Tell the powers that be that the action is done, and then don’t do a goddam thing!’ Had I followed that order I would have had a riot on my hands.”

Sources include: *The End of the Saga: The Maritime Evacuation of South Vietnam and Cambodia* by Malcolm Muir Jr., NHHHC, 2017; *Ready Seapower: A History of the U.S. Seventh Fleet* by Edward J. Marolda, NHHHC, 2012; NHHHC *Dictionary of American Fighting Ships* (DANFS) at history.navy.mil for U.S. ships; “The South Vietnamese Pilot Who Performed a Daring Feat to Save his Family” by Paul X. Rutz, historynet.com, 30 April 2019; “Operation Frequent Wind—The U.S. Evacuation of Saigon” by Tim Ripley, key.aero, 18 March 2025.