

# Commemorating U.S. Air Force Service in Major Conflicts

## The 50th Anniversary of the End of the Vietnam War (1975)

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The fall of South Vietnam in April 1975 brought an end to the multi-phase conflict in Southeast Asia with which the U.S. military and U.S. Air Force (USAF) had been involved for twenty-five years, beginning with the delivery of aid and aircraft for the French in June 1950 and the establishment of a Military Assistance Advisory Group in Saigon in September/October of that year.<sup>1</sup> As the war was concluding in the first half of 1975, the USAF, as well as the U.S. Marines and Navy, carried out extensive evacuations in both Vietnam and Cambodia under increasingly adverse conditions.<sup>2</sup>

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*The views expressed are those of the author and do not reflect the official guidance or position of the U.S. Government, the U.S. Department of Defense, the U.S. Air Force, or the U.S. Space Force.*

<sup>1</sup> For USAF activities in the first part of the conflict, see Kenneth H. Williams, *The U.S. Air Force in Southeast Asia and the Vietnam War: A Narrative Chronology*, Vol 1: *The Early Years through 1959* (Washington, DC: Air Force History and Museums Program, 2019), <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Feb/22/2002092352/-1/-1/1/USAF%20Vietnam%20Chronology%20v1.pdf>. For a full overview of the period and the roots of U.S. involvement, see Fredrik Logevall, *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> The fullest Air Force source on the withdrawal was written by three of the airmen who helped plan the operation: Lt. Col. Thomas G. Tobin, Lt. Col. Arthur E. Laehr, and Lt. Col. John F. Hilgenberg, *Last Flight from Saigon*, USAF Southeast Asia Monograph Series, Vol. 6 (Washington, DC: Air Force History and Museums Program, 1978) (hereafter *Last Flight from Saigon*), <https://media.defense.gov/2010/Sep/28/2001330140/-1/-1/0/AFD-100928-008.pdf>. For the Marines, see George R. Dunham and David A. Quinlan, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Bitter End, 1973–1975* (Washington, DC: History and Museums Division, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, 1990), particularly ch. 7–11 (hereafter *Marines in Vietnam 1973–75*), [https://usmcu.edu/Portals/218/U\\_S\\_%20Marines%20In%20Vietnam%20-%20The%20Bitter%20End%201973%20-%201975.pdf](https://usmcu.edu/Portals/218/U_S_%20Marines%20In%20Vietnam%20-%20The%20Bitter%20End%201973%20-%201975.pdf). For the Navy, see Malcolm Muir Jr., *End of the Saga: The Maritime Evacuation of South Vietnam and Cambodia* (Washington, DC: Naval History and Heritage Command, 2017), [https://www.history.navy.mil/content/dam/nhhc/research/publications/publication-508-pdf/NHHC\\_End%20of%20the%20Saga\\_508.pdf](https://www.history.navy.mil/content/dam/nhhc/research/publications/publication-508-pdf/NHHC_End%20of%20the%20Saga_508.pdf).

The Paris Peace Accords of January 27, 1973, had launched what proved to be the final chapter of the war.<sup>3</sup> In addition to a ceasefire, the documents mandated the withdrawal of U.S. combat forces from South Vietnam within sixty days, an initiative completed by the end of March of that year. The peace agreement also stipulated the release of prisoners of war. As part of what was known as Operation Homecoming, the USAF carried the 591 Americans who the North Vietnamese released out of Hanoi to Clark Air Base in the Philippines on thirty-eight C-141 flights, and ultimately back to the States. Of these, 325 POWs were USAF airmen.<sup>4</sup> The ceasefire did not cover Cambodia, and U.S. air operations continued until the U.S. Congress forced the Richard M. Nixon administration to end bombing there as of August 15, 1973.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> For the negotiations, the agreement, and its shortcomings, see Pierre Asselin, *A Bitter Peace: Washington, Hanoi, and the Making of the Paris Agreement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); Larry Berman, *No Peace, No Honor: Nixon, Kissinger, and Betrayal in Vietnam* (New York: Free Press, 2001); Robert K. Brigham, *Reckless: Henry Kissinger and the Tragedy of Vietnam* (New York: Public Affairs, 2018). For Kissinger's somewhat controversial version of the story, expanded from his memoirs, see Henry Kissinger, *Ending the Vietnam War: A History of America's Involvement in and Extrication from the Vietnam War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> Americans released in Hanoi included 325 USAF personnel, 138 Navy, 77 Army, 26 Marines, and 25 civilians. There were additional Americans, mostly Army and civilians, who had been held in South Vietnam by the Viet Cong. They were released at Loc Ninh as part of the North Vietnam-South Vietnam prisoner exchange. A total of 658 surviving U.S. military personnel were released, while the North Vietnamese recorded 113 as having died in captivity. The South Vietnamese government exchanged more than 26,000 North Vietnamese and insurgents, while North Vietnam released around 5,000 South Vietnamese troops. All parties released fewer men than expected. For the United States, POW MIA identification and recovery efforts continued for decades. "Operation Homecoming," fact sheet, National Museum of the United States Air Force, <https://www.nationalmuseum.af.mil/Visit/Museum-Exhibits/Fact-Sheets/Display/Article/197496/operation-homecoming/>; Arthur J. Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience of the French and the Americans: Nationalism and Communism in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 846; Robert D. Schulzinger, *A Time for War: The United States and Vietnam, 1941-1975* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 307. For more detailed looks, see Stuart I. Rochester and Frederick Kiley, *Honor Bound: The History of American Prisoners of War in Southeast Asia, 1961-1973* (Washington, DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense, 1998), 571-92, 595, 598-618; and Vernon E. Davis, *The Long Road Home: U.S. Prisoner of War Policy and Planning in Southeast Asia* (Washington, DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2002), 491-525. The Rochester/Kiley book contains a full list of the repatriated U.S. former prisoners.

<sup>5</sup> George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*. 4th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2002), 328; Robert Mann, *A Grand Delusion: America's Descent into Vietnam* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 716-17.

In preparation for and implementation of the peace agreement, the United States had transitioned from Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), to what was known as the Defense Attaché Office (DAO), which was based on the military side of Tan Son Nhut Airport, about a fifteen-minute drive from downtown Saigon. A U.S. Army major general headed this small command of only 50 uniformed personnel (14 USAF), 1,200 U.S. civilians (reduced to 850 at the end of 1974), and 3,500 Vietnamese (later cut to 3,000). There were also around 8,500 out-of-uniform U.S. “civilian” advisors still in South Vietnam, with 5,000 of them contracted to help the South Vietnamese military maintain its equipment. The higher-level U.S. command transitioned to Thailand as U.S. Support Activities Group (USSAG). Assets there were primarily Air Force, as treaty stipulations forbade U.S. ground troops, so the group commander was USAF Lt. Gen. John J. Burns, who was dual-hatted as head of Seventh Air Force. In addition to Burns, the DAO commander in Saigon also answered to the U.S. ambassador to South Vietnam, Graham A. Martin.<sup>6</sup>

Neither Vietnamese side recognized the legitimacy of the other, and neither heeded the ceasefire for long. The peace agreement had allowed the insurgents to keep control of the areas in the South they occupied at the time of the accords. As North Vietnamese leaders suspected he would, President Nguyen Van Thieu of South Vietnam ordered his Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) to take the offensive against the North-affiliated insurgents in the South, commonly known as Viet Cong, in an effort to reclaim this territory while he still had firm U.S. backing. These winter/spring 1973 operations brought mixed results for South Vietnam, with the ARVN regaining large amounts of territory but losing 6,000 men in the process in the first three months

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<sup>6</sup> *Last Flight from Saigon*, 3, 5; Muir, *End of the Saga*, 1, 3. In addition to the personnel assigned to the DAO, there were 159 Marines left in Vietnam to guard the embassy in Saigon and the consul offices at Da Nang, Nha Trang, Bien Hoa, and Can Tho. The initial DAO commander was Maj. Gen. John E. Murray, U.S. Army, succeeded by Maj. Gen. Homer D. Smith, U.S. Army, in August 1974.

following the peace agreement. In all, there were some 2,900 reported skirmishes during 1973. The United States not only did not attempt to rein in Thieu, it bolstered his efforts by turning over its military bases to the South Vietnamese, in violation of the peace terms, which had stipulated that they be dismantled.<sup>7</sup>

Brutal campaigns in 1972 had left the North's People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) in desperate need of time to recover and reorganize. That situation, in addition to sagging morale from economic challenges and USAF B-52 bombings, had led North Vietnamese leader Le Duan to accept what he previously would not: a peace agreement short of total victory. The objective of complete conquest remained front and center, however, and seemed more achievable with the United States withdrawn from the equation. To that end, North Vietnam kept expanding the Ho Chi Minh Trail after the Paris agreement, no longer harassed by U.S. bombing. (USAF did maintain aerial surveillance of traffic on the trail.) The North Vietnamese also began construction on a 1,050-mile gas pipeline with 101 pumping stations to fuel movements along the trail routes.<sup>8</sup>

Beginning in the spring of 1973 soon after the U.S. completed its withdrawal, Hanoi started pushing tens of thousands of regular troops into the South by way of the

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<sup>7</sup> Pierre Asselin, *Vietnam's American War: A History* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 214, 220–21; Schulzinger, *Time for War*, 310–13; Bernard C. Nalty, *Air War over South Vietnam, 1968–1975* (Washington, DC: Air Force History and Museums Program, 2000), 403,

<https://media.defense.gov/2010/Sep/24/2001330077/-1/-1/0/AFD-100924-004.pdf>. The insurgent organization in the South was more properly known as the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam (NLF), with the People's Liberation Armed Forces (PLAF) as its military arm. Ngo Dinh Diem, who led South Vietnam from 1954 to 1963, had begun derisively referring to the insurgents as "Viet Cong," short for Vietnamese communists.

<sup>8</sup> Asselin, *Vietnam's American War*, 210–13; Herring, *America's Longest War*, 325; Nalty, *Air War*, 403; Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954–1975*, trans. Merle L. Pribbenow (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 348–49 (hereafter *Victory in Vietnam*). There was no ceasefire in Laos until February 21, 1973. Prior to that date, the USAF flew 386 attack sorties in January and 1,449 in February, with no lost aircraft. Earl H. Tilford Jr., *Search and Rescue in Southeast Asia, 1961–1975* (Washington, DC: Office of Air Force History, 1980), 133, <https://media.defense.gov/2010/Sep/29/2001329780/-1/-1/0/AFD-100929-010.pdf>.

Ho Chi Minh Trail, along with four times the volume of supplies than what had been moved in 1972. According to the Vietnamese official history, by late 1973, total forces in the South, including regulars and insurgents, reached 310,000. (More than 100,000 PAVN regulars had remained in the South as part of the peace accords.) This strength still left the PAVN and Viet Cong at what seemed to be a significant disadvantage as the U.S.-equipped South Vietnamese regular and paramilitary troops numbered more than a million, at that time the fifth-largest military in the world, with the Vietnamese air force (VNAF) the fourth-largest by some estimates. In many ways it was a paper force, however, one heavily dependent on U.S. provisions that the U.S. Congress began reducing almost immediately after American withdrawal.<sup>9</sup>

Debates in the North Vietnamese government on when and how to resume full-scale operations continued for more than a year and half. Both China and the Soviet Union, Hanoi's major benefactors, told the North Vietnamese to postpone a major offensive for several years and cut aid to Le Duan's government and military. The problem with that scenario was that the leadership in Hanoi had staked its reputation on reunification of Vietnam. As historian Pierre Asselin put it, "Waiting years before resuming the struggle for national reunification meant losing revolutionary momentum." In addition, many of their insurgent compatriots in the South had not wanted the ceasefire, and there was no guarantee that they would stand down, all the more with already-increasing ARVN operations against them. A July 1973 resolution from the North Vietnamese Central Committee authorized the Viet Cong to "resolutely counterattack," and skirmishing increased significantly over the second half of the year. Fighting during 1974 was sporadic, rarely rising above what could be described as raids by both sides, with the Viet Cong becoming more aggressive after a March 1974

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<sup>9</sup> Asselin, *Vietnam's American War*, 212, 221, 227; *Victory in Vietnam*, 338–39; Muir, *End of the Saga*, 1. For PAVN and ARVN troop and equipment strength in 1973 and 1974, see Michael Clodfelter, *Vietnam in Military Statistics: A History of the Indochina Wars, 1772–1991* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1995), 206–7.

directive from the North. South Vietnamese opposition to these probing strikes remained stiff as Thieu continued to insist that all ground in South Vietnam be held or reclaimed, at any cost. In October 1974, the Politburo in Hanoi finally adopted a strategic plan that outlined the start of larger-scale attacks, focusing on the Central Highlands, with the major offensive to win the war scheduled for 1976.<sup>10</sup>

Both sides paid close attention to political developments that were likely to diminish the potential for U.S. reengagement in Southeast Asia. In the initial period after the peace accords, the U.S. military had kept significant air and naval assets in the Gulf of Tonkin and at air bases in Thailand, the Philippines, and Guam, and it had not dismantled its bases in South Vietnam. Richard Nixon was determined not to be seen as the first U.S. president to lose a war and had given Thieu repeated assurances that the United States would come to his aid if necessary.<sup>11</sup> In November 1973, however, Congress passed the War Powers Act over Nixon's veto. The new law required congressional approval to keep forces committed beyond an initial emergency deployment. The Watergate scandal was in full bloom by that point and ultimately led to Nixon's resignation on August 9, 1974. Gerald R. Ford succeeded him as president, acutely aware of the war-weariness of both Congress and the American people. The country also was confronting a deepening recession. Officials in Hanoi increasingly

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<sup>10</sup> Asselin, *Vietnam's American War*, 213–15, 222–27; John Prados, *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War, 1945–1975* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009), 525–28.

<sup>11</sup> For extensive documentation of Nixon's promises of support, see Nguyen Tien Hung and Jerrold L. Schecter, *The Palace File: Vietnam Secret Documents* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986). Despite these promises, Nixon and his national security advisor, Henry A. Kissinger, never thought that peace between North and South could be enforced for long, even if the United States renewed USAF B-52 bombing. For the debate among historians about the so-called "decent interval strategy," see Kenneth H. Williams, ed., "'The Issues Raised by Vietnam Go to the Very Heart of Who We Think We Are': An Interview with the University of Kentucky's George C. Herring," *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society*, 102 (Summer 2004): 347–49; Jeffrey Kimball, "Decent Interval or Not? The Paris Agreement and the End of the Vietnam War," *Passport*, December 2003, 26–31; Larry Berman, "A Final Word on the Decent Interval Strategy," *Passport*, December 2003, 32–33.

believed that the United States would not reengage in Vietnam when fighting escalated.<sup>12</sup>

In the midst of increasing protests in South Vietnam against Thieu and his government, the North Vietnamese decided to test U.S. and South Vietnamese resolve with one of their first larger-scale operations. They targeted Phuoc Long Province, less than 100 miles north of Saigon, near the Cambodian border. This area was the terminus of the gas pipeline that supported the Ho Chi Minh Trail and also contained an ARVN arsenal with a large cache of artillery ammunition, much needed by the PAVN because of cuts in supplies from the Chinese and Soviets. U.S. and South Vietnamese intelligence did not anticipate a major PAVN offensive until 1976, so the scale of the attacks in Phuoc Long that began on December 13, 1974, caught everyone by surprise.<sup>13</sup>

The epic incapability of the South Vietnamese forces was also startling. By January 6, the entire province had fallen in the face of the PAVN/Viet Cong advance, with 3,000 ARVN troops killed or captured. Ford asked Congress for a \$300 million military aid package, which stalled on Capitol Hill, but the president, after having his aides secretly review what might be possible, made no move toward direct U.S. aerial or naval reengagement. With these confirmations of South Vietnam vulnerability and American inaction, Le Duan pushed for a radical acceleration of the North Vietnamese

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<sup>12</sup> Mann, *Grand Delusion*, 696–98, 717–18; Asselin, *Vietnam's American War*, 225; Herring, *America's Longest War*, 331; Schulzinger, *Time for War*, 314–17.

<sup>13</sup> Schulzinger, *Time for War*, 318–20; Asselin, *Vietnam's American War*, 227; Herring, *America's Longest War*, 332; Prados, *Vietnam*, 528. For the failures of the VNAF during this fight, see Nalty, *Air War*, 519. For a detailed history of the military campaigns in 1975, see George J. Veith, *Black April: The Fall of South Vietnam, 1973–75* (New York: Encounter Books, 2012). Veith covers Phuoc Long on pp. 92–114. There is also extensive coverage of the final campaign in James H. Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam: How America Left and South Vietnam Lost Its War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 223–76; Cao Van Vien, *The Final Collapse* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1983), 58–156, <https://history.army.mil/portals/143/Images/Publications/catalog/90-26.pdf>; Olivier Todd, *Cruel April: The Fall of Saigon, 1973–1975* (New York: Norton, 1990).

timetable for victory, shifting from a target of the end of 1976 to April/May 1975, before the onset of the annual monsoon season.<sup>14</sup>

On March 1, 1975, four divisions of PAVN regulars emerged from the Central Highlands to significantly escalate the conflict, making a feint toward Pleiku before advancing on the more vulnerable city of Ban Me Thuot, home to 100,000 people and a large arsenal of artillery ammunition. The ARVN II Corps commander at Pleiku, fooled by Viet Cong-planted intelligence into thinking that Ban Me Thuot was surrounded, refused to send reinforcements, and Ban Me Thuot surrendered on March 11. With the threat that South Vietnam would be cut in two, on March 14, Thieu ordered the abandonment of Pleiku and the redeployment of forces from the northern provinces to the coast and to the defense of Saigon, surrendering the strategic bulwark of the Central Highlands in the process. The withdrawal, which became known as the “convoy of tears,” was chaotic, and the advancing PAVN troops captured vast amounts of materiel, including tanks, large artillery pieces, and armored personnel carriers. ARVN soldiers deserted in great numbers. The VNAF, CIA-owned Air America, and civilian airlines managed to evacuate around 10,000 people by way of the former U.S. air base at Pleiku, and the VNAF flew all air-capable planes out of the base there before it fell, but its airmen did not destroy the extensive supplies at the base before abandoning it.<sup>15</sup>

The United States had more or less abided by the Paris agreement, and the USAF had left flying over Vietnam to the VNAF. In neighboring Cambodia, where the rapidly advancing, communist-supported Khmer Rouge was tightening the noose on the U.S.-

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<sup>14</sup> Asselin, *Vietnam's American War*, 227–28; Herring, *America's Longest War*, 332; Prados, *Vietnam*, 528; Schulzinger, *Time for War*, 319–20. An eight-member U.S. congressional delegation visited South Vietnam and Cambodia in early March as both situations took significant turns for the worse.

<sup>15</sup> Veith, *Black April*, 142–234; *Last Flight from Saigon*, 16–17; Asselin, *Vietnam's American War*, 228–29; Nalty, *Air War*, 419; Ray L. Bowers, *The United States Air Force in Southeast Asia: Tactical Airlift* (Washington, DC: Office of Air Force History, 1983), 637, <https://media.defense.gov/2010/Oct/13/2001329761/-1/-1/0/AFD-101013-035.pdf>; Nguyen Cao Ky with Marvin J. Wolf, *Buddha's Child: My Fight to Save Vietnam* (New York: St. Martin's, 2002), 313–14, 324; Christopher Robbins, *Air America* (New York: Putnam's, 1979), 266.

backed government at around the same time, the United States had to make other arrangements. The U.S. military had contracted in 1974 with a civilian U.S. company called BirdAir to provide civilian crews to fly USAF C-130s on aid missions to Cambodia from U-Tapao Air Base in Thailand. Flights to Phnom Penh increased in January 1975 in the face of the Khmer Rouge advance, which had started on January 1, with daily deliveries reaching an average of 1,200 tons by March. The United States also contracted with civilian commercial airlines in the region to multiply the delivery volume. USSAG and Seventh Air Force went on twenty-four hour readiness posture as of March 6 for Operation Eagle Pull, the final-stage evacuation plan for Americans in the capital. As part of preparation, 432d Tactical Fighter Wing from Udorn Royal Thai Air Force Base outside of Bangkok made reconnaissance flights over Phnom Penh.<sup>16</sup>

By April 3, with Phnom Penh under siege and its airport being shelled, the BirdAir-operated USAF planes began evacuation flights, which lasted until the 11th and extracted nearly 1,000 people. U.S. Marine helicopters carried out an additional 276 people, including 82 Americans, on April 12 as the last phase of Eagle Pull, including the U.S. ambassador and Cambodia's acting president, with landings at a soccer stadium as the airport was no longer accessible. Six search-and-rescue USAF HH-53s flew above in case anything went awry, with one extracting the Marine combat control team and the other the ground security force. Machine-gun fire hit the last HH-53 while it was taking off, and it had to carefully return to Ubon, Thailand. BirdAir-crewed USAF fixed-wing sorties provided the last air-dropped supplies on April 13-16 as

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<sup>16</sup> Bowers, *Tactical Airlift*, 627, 631-35; Col. C. W. Calhoun, 307 SW, end-of-tour report, February 15, 1975-August 12, 1975, Air Force Historical Research Agency (AFHRA), Maxwell AFB, AL, Call# K416.131 Calhoun, C.W., IRIS# 01007162 (hereafter Calhoun report); Col. William T. McAdoo, 432d TFW, end-of-tour report, March 25, 1974-September 20, 1975, AFHRA, Call# K717.131 McAdoo, W.T., IRIS# 01007913 (hereafter McAdoo report).

Phnom Penh fell to the Khmer Rouge on the 17th.<sup>17</sup> The horrors in Cambodia were just beginning, as genocide over the subsequent four years would exterminate a quarter of the population.

There were standing plans in countries where the United States had embassies for the evacuation of diplomatic personnel, but those documents assumed the maintenance of a modicum of control that had not proved possible in Phnom Penh, nor would it in Saigon just a couple of weeks later. The small contingent of U.S. military personnel that remained in Saigon had for months, at the direction of the ambassador, been updating the ever-changing details for South Vietnam. The operations plan was code named Talon Vise, subsequently Frequent Wind. The USAF officers involved in the planning later wrote that “not only was the task monumental, but it was nearly impossible even to define it.” A Marine officer concurred: “We had so damn many options I couldn’t really keep up with them all.” The coordinating documents estimated 8,000 Americans and other foreign representatives to be extracted across a four-phase operation (subsequently a five-phase one) but included a wide variance in the number of Vietnamese who had worked with the Americans who might be endangered, anywhere from 1,500 to a million, which would be far beyond the capacity to transport. Col. Robert R. Reed, battle staff director for Seventh Air Force, recounted that “the ever-changing number of evacuees to be extracted precluded any possible prediction as to the duration of the operation.” He also noted that “the extremely limited time from initial planning to execution” resulted in “an ever-increasing time compression for all key decisions.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Bowers, *Tactical Airlift*, 632–35; Tilford, *Search and Rescue*, 138–41; Muir, *End of the Saga*, 13–15; *Marines in Vietnam 1973–75*, 100–124. According to Muir (p. 13), relatively late in the planning process, the embassy in Phnom Penh almost doubled the number of people to be extracted, from 666 to 1,172.

<sup>18</sup> *Last Flight from Saigon*, 8–13, 47 (quote, 8); Col. Robert R. Reed, Seventh AF, end-of-tour report, July 1, 1974–June 30, 1975, AFHRA, Call# K712.131, IRIS# 01007403 (hereafter Reed Report). Marine quote from Muir, *End of the Saga*, 18. The three authors of *Last Flight* were involved in the planning of Frequent Wind, and two in the final execution of it.

As long as there was airport accessibility, USAF aircraft from bases in Thailand, and the Philippines if necessary, could carry out large numbers, but if fixed-wing landings were no longer possible, Marine helicopters flying off of U.S. carriers in the South China Sea would be the last option. The Marine/Navy rotary-wing planning drew heavily on the lessons learned from the Phnom Penh evacuation and would involve many of the same crews and aircraft, as did Air Force preparation. As Col. William T. McAdoo of 432d Tactical Fighter Wing wrote, “The lessons learned from the Cambodian contingency solved practically all of our local problems” with planning and coordination.<sup>19</sup>

No one expected the Talon Vise/Frequent Wind plans to come into play as soon as they did, but the rapidly cascading collapse of the million-man South Vietnamese military was stunning. The withdrawal of troops southward for the defense of Saigon created chaos along the coast, particularly in Hue and Da Nang. The last Americans left Hue on March 23 after the ARVN made no stand there, with hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese in the region streaming into Da Nang, about fifty miles to the south, seeking some way out. Refugees, including ARVN troops and their families, stormed the World Airways fixed-wing and Air America helicopter flights into and out of the air base there, which continued until March 29. Da Nang fell to the PAVN on the 30th.<sup>20</sup>

As conditions rapidly worsened, President Ford sent the Army Chief of Staff, Gen. Frederick C. Weyand, who had been the senior U.S. military commander in Vietnam in 1972–73, for an unvarnished opinion. After being on the ground from March

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<sup>19</sup> Muir, *End of the Saga*, 17–20; McAdoo report. Although planning included evacuation flights to Thailand, the bases there would not end up as a destination when the extrication effort actually started, or at least not an official one. Many VNAF pilots flew their planes to Thailand, often bringing relatives with them.

<sup>20</sup> *Last Flight from Saigon*, 18–19; Veith, *Black April*, 264–329; Robbins, *Air America*, 266–70; *Air America: Upholding the Airmen’s Bond* (McLean, VA: CIA Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2013), 14, 31–32, <https://www.cia.gov/static/Air-America-Upholding-the-Airmens-Bond.pdf> (hereafter *Air America [CIA]*). Ambassador Martin estimated that there were half a million refugees crowding the coastal cities. Muir, *End of the Saga*, 7.

28 to April 4, Weyand reported that “the current military situation is critical, and the possibility of the survival of South Vietnam as a truncated nation in the southern provinces is marginal at best.” Nevertheless, the increasingly desperate Ford administration went back to Congress with a request for \$722 million for military assistance. Congress modified the bill to \$300 million for evacuation of Americans and humanitarian purposes and approved Ford’s request to use U.S. military personnel in the extraction. There would be no time before the fall of South Vietnam to actually spend the money, but U.S. military involvement over the final weeks would be substantial.<sup>21</sup>

With the rapid deterioration of conditions to the north, on April 1, 1975, the Defense Attaché Office stood up an Evacuation Control Center at Tan Son Nhut, staffed by four USAF, three U.S. Navy, three U.S. Marine, and two U.S. Army officers. Initial efforts focused on coordinating the U.S. Navy-led sealift from the northern military sectors to Nha Trang and Cam Ranh Bay, then farther south from those locations in the face of the rapid PAVN advance. The hope had been to evacuate a million people from the central coast, but only an estimated 113,000 made it onto transports, a number that nevertheless overwhelmed processing and housing capacity in southern South Vietnam.<sup>22</sup>

Evacuation flights from Tan Son Nhut aboard USAF C-130s and C-141s began during the first week in April following an appeal by the South Vietnamese directly to President Ford. These transports delivered supplies each day and were the perfect

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<sup>21</sup> Mann, *Grand Delusion*, 721; Herring, *America’s Longest War*, 334, 336; Berman, *No Peace, No Honor*, 265 (quote); Schulzinger, *Time for War*, 322–23. According to these sources, Ford knew that Congress would not approve the aid package at the level he asked, but he and Kissinger hoped to shift some of the blame to the legislative branch when South Vietnam fell.

<sup>22</sup> *Last Flight from Saigon*, 21–24; Muir, *End of the Saga*, 7–10; Edward J. Marolda, *By Sea, Air, and Land: An Illustrated History of the U.S. Navy and the War in Southeast Asia* (Washington, DC: Naval Historical Center, 1994), 355–58, <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/library/online-reading-room/title-list-alphabetically/b/by-sea-air-land-marolda/chapter-5-the-final-curtain-1973-1975.html>. For the ARVN efforts at Nha Trang and Cam Ranh Bay, see *Black April*, 332–56.

vehicle to start carrying out large numbers of people, but due to bureaucratic red tape for refugees and the concern of U.S. ambassador Graham Martin that escalating the departure of U.S. embassy personnel and dependents might cause panic among the South Vietnamese, these aircraft took off well below capacity for their return flights, with some virtually empty.<sup>23</sup>

Media reporting that “Americans are streaming out of South Vietnam” on commercial flights had led the U.S. embassy in Saigon to issue a statement on April 1 that “the embassy has not ordered or suggested evacuation of its American personnel.” The *New York Times* correspondent called the statement “what appeared to be an effort to prevent panic among Saigon’s two million residents” by continuing “to insist publicly that the embassy had no plans for evacuation.” The writer noted that the fall of Da Nang seemed to have triggered the increase in departures. Several of the commercial airlines in the region were already threatening to stop flights to Tan Son Nhut because of security concerns. Many of the Vietnamese who had worked for the U.S. government or contractors “were clearly becoming frightened today and looked to the United States mission to do something to help them.” The U.S. consulate was “jammed.”<sup>24</sup>

Many among both the South Vietnamese and the Americans came to see Ambassador Martin, a strident anticommunist whose career Nixon had salvaged after the State Department had fired him from his post in Thailand, as a significant impediment in the final months and weeks. “Martin was a born generalissimo,” Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger later wrote derisively, “the Foreign Service’s equivalent of Douglas MacArthur.” VNAF Air Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky, who Martin

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<sup>23</sup> Bowers, *Tactical Airlift*, 640; Coy F. Cross II, *MAC and Operation Babylift: Air Transport in Support of Noncombatant Evacuation Operations* (Scott AFB, IL: Military Airlift Command, 1989), 10, 34, <https://media.defense.gov/2012/Aug/31/2001330018/-1/-1/0/AFD-120831-032.pdf>.

<sup>24</sup> Fox Butterfield, “Many Americans Quit Vietnam; U.S. Denies Evacuation Orders,” *New York Times*, April 2, 1975, 1, <https://www.nytimes.com/1975/04/02/archives/many-americans-quit-vietnam-us-denies-evacuation-orders-americans.html>.

would try to convince to replace Thieu after Martin orchestrated Thieu's resignation, described the ambassador as being "as cold and smooth as a marble slab in a mortuary" and "a man incapable of changing his mind." Martin, the son of a southern country preacher, "spoke in the biblical cadences and absolutes of one fully confident of his own divine mission," according to Saigon-based CIA analyst Frank W. Snepp. The general in command of the DAO told Snepp that "if Curtis LeMay had invented an ambassador, he would have invented Martin. You know, 'Bomb them back to the Stone Age.'" At age sixty-three, Martin physically was "a frail and broken man," according to Snepp, so limited that he only ventured out of Saigon once during his two years of service there. Nevertheless, he reveled in intelligence and "habitually schemes," according to another CIA official, "has a conspiratorial and clandestine mentality, and immediately tries to put you under his control." A Snepp colleague described Martin as "a culmination of the megalomania that has marked all U.S. ambassadors in Vietnam." Martin told Kissinger that he wanted to organize the U.S. withdrawal in a way that "would not add a further disgrace to the sad history of our involvement," but his delays in allowing the implementation of plans would do just that, with Kissinger growing ever more exasperated.<sup>25</sup>

One evacuation effort that did gain traction was what became known as Operation Babylift. President Ford had announced the program to relocate orphans on April 3. On the 4th, a USAF C-5A took off from Tan Son Nhut with 228 Vietnamese

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<sup>25</sup> Frank Snepp, *Decent Interval: An Insider's Account of Saigon's Indecent End, Told by the CIA's Chief Strategy Analyst in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1977), 66–74; Nguyen Cao Ky, *How We Lost the Vietnam War* (New York: Scarborough Books, 1978), 8, 207; Herring, *America's Longest War*, 337 (final quote); Veith, *Black April*, 47–48; *Air America* (CIA), 18, 33–34; Schulzinger, *Time for War*, 315–16, 324–25. Part of Martin's unwillingness to accept the demise of South Vietnam seemed to lay in the fact that one of his nephews had been killed in action there in 1965. Ky (p. 207) thought that Martin was "thoroughly distrusted and disliked in Washington," and "many believed he was not sending truthful cables back to headquarters in Washington." See also Ky, *Buddha's Child*, 328. Malcolm Muir wrote that Martin refused "to envision the total collapse of the South Vietnamese government," which "complicated the job of the uniformed leaders [who were trying to plan for an evacuation] immensely." Muir, *End of the Saga*, 18.

children, escorted by thirty-six analysts and secretaries from the DAO—all women who had been deemed “non-essential” personnel. Soon after takeoff, however, a midair structural failure forced the pilot to attempt to return to the airport. He did not make it, as Capt. Dennis W. Traynor had to crash land in rice patties by the Saigon River about two miles short of the runway. His skill saved 175 people, but 138 perished—78 children, 35 of the 36 DAO women, 11 USAF members, and three dependents of U.S. personnel.<sup>26</sup>

A CIA secretary described the scene as helicopters brought the children back to Tan Son Nhut: “As the children were carried off the choppers and piled into the ambulances, you couldn’t tell if they were alive or dead. Nearly every one of them was covered from head to toe with mud.” She recounted that “the nurses would simply pass the children under the shower, saying, ‘This one’s alive; this one’s dead.’” The only identification on the children was a wristband with the address of each foster home to which they were bound. This secretary had to match the addresses with a names list in an attempt to figure out the casualties and notify the homes that were expecting children. Of the 228 children on the flight, 150 survived.<sup>27</sup>

After investigation of what had gone wrong, flights resumed two days later. According to Military Airlift Command accounting, Operation Babylift extracted 2,638 children on both USAF and commercial flights from April 6 to 26. These numbers may be incomplete, as some figures range from 3,300 to 4,000. Of these, around 2,000 children went to the United States for adoption while flights carried the rest to new homes in Canada, Australia, and Western Europe.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Cross, *MAC and Operation Babylift*, 33–39, 61.

<sup>27</sup> Robbins, *Air America*, 272.

<sup>28</sup> Cross, *MAC and Operation Babylift*, 58–60. Muir, *End of the Saga*, 17, has a total of 2,926, while a USAID report in 1975 gave the number as 2,547. Of those, 1,945 were adopted in the United States and 602 in other countries. Adoption History Project, <https://pages.uoregon.edu/adoption/archive/AIDOBOR.htm>. It is unclear whether the higher counts include children who were on general evacuation flights and not on the specified Babylift ones. See Allison Martin, “The Legacy of Operation Babylift,” *Adoption Today*, v. 2,

Beyond the orphan relocation, through April 17, only 4,000 people, both Americans and Vietnamese, had left the country from Saigon, flown by both USAF and contract commercial flights. Air America carried out Vietnamese who had been involved with intelligence activities and the South Vietnamese defense ministry. This was a staggeringly small number of people considering the wave of humanity that would flow over the subsequent two weeks. As historian George C. Herring wrote, "Some U.S. officials persisted in the belief the South Vietnamese would mount an effective defense until the North Vietnamese were at the gates of Saigon."<sup>29</sup>

In reality, there had been very little resistance, other than a determined ARVN fight at Xuan Loc along its last defensive line about forty miles east of Saigon. When the order to abandon Xuan Loc came on April 19, the end game entered a new phase, although it would be a week before the PAVN launched its Ho Chi Minh Campaign, the final assault on the South Vietnamese capital city.<sup>30</sup>

USAF officers in the DAO in charge of planning the fixed-wing evacuation had endured ever-evolving orders from various parties that had gone from an extraction number at the beginning of April of 1,500 to 6,000 people, to 200,000 by mid-month after promises President Ford made in a speech, to Ambassador Martin wanting a plan to evacuate up a million Vietnamese. The movement of such large numbers would have required weeks if not months, a time frame no longer possible. The first priority was the Americans, and as of the fall of Xuan Loc on April 19, only 2,535 of an estimated 10,000 had departed. As of that date, the plan was for a total evacuation of 203,955, which one

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no. 4, March 2000, <https://www.adoptvietnam.org/adoption/babylift.htm>. For an overview of ethical issues with Babylift, including that many of the children sent were not orphans, see Schulzinger, *Time for War*, 321–22.

<sup>29</sup> Bowers, *Tactical Airlift*, 641; *Last Flight from Saigon*, 45–46; Herring, *America's Longest War*, 336; Robbins, *Air America*, 274–75. The Air America pilots in Saigon could not understand Ambassador Martin's inaction and wondered whether he knew something they didn't about the South Vietnamese resistance or potential U.S. response. Robbins, *Air America*, 272.

<sup>30</sup> Veith, *Black April*, 436–59.

author called a “curiously exact number.” USSAG had placed Frequent Wind on twenty-four-hour readiness posture on the 18th.<sup>31</sup>

According to Kissinger, the military had given the White House an estimate that helicopter lift capacity for one day was around 1,250 people. Based on that figure, on April 18, President Ford had approved a plan that ordered Martin to reduce U.S. personnel in Saigon to that number by April 22. The ambassador slow-rolled this order, supposedly for fear of undermining the South Vietnamese government. Col. Robert Reed of Seventh Air Force recorded that “the reluctance of the American ambassador to recognize the critical nature of the threat caused a delayed decision to execute any of the military options” for evacuation. Kissinger would later call Martin “contentious,” “imperious,” and “occasionally insubordinate.” When challenged in a postwar interview about the deliberate pace of evacuation of Americans, Martin said that Nguyen Ngoc Loan, the ruthless former chief of the South Vietnamese National Police who had been shown in a Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph executing a Viet Cong prisoner during the Tet Offensive in 1968, had told Martin during the final weeks that “if you Americans think that you’re going to just walk away and leave us, you’ll never make it to the airport.”<sup>32</sup>

As Saigon’s fate became inevitable, Kissinger sent a secret request to the North Vietnamese through the Soviets asking for a delay in the final assault to allow time for all Americans to be extracted, but if or how much the PAVN honored this plea is

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<sup>31</sup> *Last Flight from Saigon*, 46–47; Muir, *End of the Saga*, 17 (quote); Calhoun report.

<sup>32</sup> Kissinger, *Ending the Vietnam War*, 541, 553; Reed report. Michael Charlton and Anthony Moncrieff, *Many Reasons Why: The American Involvement in Vietnam* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 238 (Martin quote). It should be noted that the recorded number of Americans extracted by helicopter on the last day was 1,373 (see below), so the U.S. presence did get thinned during the last week, but the general evacuation at the end was significantly more chaotic than anyone thought it should have been, due heavily to Martin’s delays. What Martin did not note in his interview was that the U.S. embassy denied Loan’s request for evacuation. Loan, as a former general, had the connections to arrange egress for himself and his family on a VNAF aircraft. He settled in the suburbs outside of Washington, where he ran a pizzeria in Burke, VA.

unclear.<sup>33</sup> Despite his stated goals of mass evacuation, Martin continued to nix opportunities at every turn to take advantage of the rapidly diminishing time that was left. On April 24, he rejected a planned sealift of 30,000 people from the port at Saigon for fear that it would increase panic in the capital and contribute to the fall of the interim government. (President Thieu had resigned on the 21st under pressure from the North Vietnamese and from Martin. The USAF flew Thieu to Taiwan on the 26th.) At one point during the final week, Martin told the Marine general planning the prospective final (helicopter) phase that “he had no intention of conducting a mass evacuation from the embassy,” that two Air America helicopters to carry around 100 people total would be all that was required, ignoring that Air America flew UH-1s, which seated only twelve passengers. Martin also insisted, at least as late as April 28, that U.S. personnel continue to abide by the Paris Accord restriction of only fifty men in-country in uniform.<sup>34</sup>

The ambassador’s slow pace at both accepting the need for evacuation and at accelerating it confused those still in Saigon. Air America pilots recalled a few days where there was a false sense of security because many assumed that Martin knew something they did not, either about an unexpected ARVN stand or U.S. military intervention, with the latter rumor gaining some momentum as Task Force 76 from the

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<sup>33</sup> Asselin, *Vietnam’s American War*, 230; Schulzinger, *Time for War*, 326. Concurrently, the NLF was negotiating with the South Vietnamese government in Saigon. On April 19, its leader demanded that Thieu be removed or the city would be taken by force. This demand was the final nail for Thieu, who Martin helped force out on the 21st. The NLF also rejected the aged vice president who replaced Thieu, and the assault began on the 26th. Robert K. Brigham, *Guerrilla Diplomacy: The NLF’s Foreign Relations and the Viet Nam War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 125.

<sup>34</sup> *Last Flight from Saigon*, 40, 70; Bowers, *Tactical Airlift*, 642; *Marines in Vietnam 1973–75*, 178; Muir, *End of the Saga*, 26 (quote). In an attempt to avoid Martin’s disapproval, on April 25, the DAO had Air America fly in forty Marines dressed as civilians for increased security of evacuation of operations. *Air America* (CIA), 34. Military Sealift Command ships, under U.S. Marine operation, did evacuate approximately 30,000 Vietnamese across April 26 to 30. 9th Marine Amphibious Brigade command chronology, March 26–April 30, 1975, Texas Tech Vietnam Center, <https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/images.php?img=/images/1201/1201053187.pdf> (hereafter 9th MAB chron).

U.S. Navy's Seventh Fleet steamed into the South China Sea. In Washington, however, Secretary Kissinger fumed about Martin's "stonewalling," which he properly diagnosed as "dangerous."<sup>35</sup>

Between April 20 and the early hours of the 29th, at which time PAVN artillery rendered Tan Son Nhut inaccessible to fixed-wing aircraft, USAF and U.S. military contracted flights carried more than 40,000 people out of Vietnam. On the 26th and 27th alone, at the peak of the operation, forty-six C-130 and twenty-eight C-141 flights transported 12,000 people. Air crews flew sorties around the clock, with the C-141s generally landing during the day and the C-130s at night. As the tempo of operations increased, the aircraft were only on the ground at Tan Son Nhut for thirty minutes, sometimes as few as fifteen, with their engines left running. Buses pulled onto the tarmac to load passengers by the rear of the planes. Buses initially carried 40 people, but soon it became 60 to 70 with no luggage allowed. Approved flight loads had been increased from 94 on C-141s and 75 on C-130s to 180 passengers on each aircraft, although by the last flights there were more than 300 on C-141s and 260 on C-130s. The C-130s ferried the Americans and the Vietnamese refugees to Clark Air Base in the Philippines, while the C-141s had the range to fly directly to Guam, which became one of the primary processing points for immigration on to the U.S. mainland.<sup>36</sup>

There was chaos in Saigon during this week, which had increased when the PAVN signaled its immediate intentions with a massive artillery barrage that began at 5 p.m. on April 26. Shelling reached downtown by the morning of the 27th. South Vietnamese, particularly those who feared retribution for working for the Americans,

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<sup>35</sup> Robbins, *Air America*, 272; *Air America* (CIA), 33 (quote); Schulzinger, *Time for War*, 325.

<sup>36</sup> Bowers, *Tactical Airlift*, 641-42; *Last Flight from Saigon*, 60, 64, 68-69, 90, 122. Air America pilots knew of a few Americans who took substantial bribes to sign authorization for certain wealthy Vietnamese to secure seats on the transports. Robbins, *Air America*, 276-77. Starting April 22, there was an additional requirement for Military Airlift Command to start moving at least 5,000 of the refugees out of Clark to Guam, Wake Island, and Yokota Air Base, Japan, necessitating the deployment of more C-141s. *Last Flight from Saigon*, 62-63.

stormed the airport and the U.S. embassy seeking a means of escape. Efforts to efficiently process paperwork for emigration became hopeless. Due to U.S. bureaucratic and diplomatic delays and the rapidity of the PAVN advance, only about 25 percent of the estimated 90,000 South Vietnamese who had worked for the Americans were able to make it out of the country.<sup>37</sup>

If the artillery could reach downtown, it could also hit the airport, prompting the decision on April 27 to end C-141 flights, as these aircraft were more vulnerable and more valuable than the C-130s. The smaller C-130s would carry the load around the clock for as long as possible. Just after 6 p.m. on the 28th, three A-37s flown by defector VNAF pilots bombed the VNAF flight line at Tan Son Nhut, halting all incoming and outgoing traffic at the airport. The USAF resumed flights at 3 a.m. on the 29th, landing three C-130s within thirty minutes. As the first one attempted to take off, a PAVN rocket exploded under its wing and set the aircraft ablaze. Airmen from the 21st Tactical Airlift Squadron cleared the runway as quickly as possible and boarded the other two planes, which took off successfully while under fire. Ambassador Martin, who had ordered the fixed-wing evacuation of 10,000 people on the 29th, was incredulous at the news and took the dangerous step of coming to the airport around 7 a.m. and walking the flight line. By 8:10 a.m., DAO staffers were leaving Tan Son Nhut, and all VNAF aircraft that were flight-capable were on their way to Thailand. PAVN forces had staunchly the last ground route out of Saigon on the 28th, so rotary-wing transport was the only option remaining.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Veith, *Black April*, 474–75; *Last Flight from Saigon*, 69; Sneypp, *Decent Interval*, 595–96. According to the diary of an Air America pilot quoted in Robbins, Vietnamese were lined up at the airport gate all week. As of April 24, the DAO started having areas cleared at the airport to serve as helipads if helicopter evacuation became necessary. USAF was making preparations to destroy aircraft if there was not time to get them all out. Looting started increasing in Saigon. Robbins, *Air America*, 277–78.

<sup>38</sup> *Last Flight from Saigon*, 69–77; *Marines in Vietnam 1973–75*, 169; Muir, *End of the Saga*, 23. The official histories do not record the fixed-wing flights out of Tan Son Nhut on the morning of April 29. VNAF pilots took off for U-Tapao Air Base in Thailand in any VNAF aircraft available, often with family members aboard. Air America pilots also carried refugees in their small number C-46s and C-47s as they

Martin had called Secretary Kissinger before going to the airport on the morning of the 29th, and President Ford had convened a National Security Council meeting an hour later. The primary question was whether Tan Son Nhut would still be available that day. Kissinger told the president that he likely would have to decide within the next few hours whether to extract the embassy personnel during the night of the 29th and that the embassy compound might be needed for evacuation. "I would pull everybody out," Kissinger said. "The North Vietnamese have the intention of humiliating us, and it seems unwise to leave people there." Ford agreed and asked whether helicopter airlift was ready to act, to which he received an affirmative reply.<sup>39</sup>

After Martin returned to the embassy from his airport reconnaissance, he called Kissinger again, three hours after their previous conversation. The ambassador reported that "security is disintegrating at Tan Son Nhut" and said, "I think the only thing to do is to go for execute on Frequent Wind," by which he meant Option IV, which was the helicopter evacuation phase of all remaining American personnel. "I'm not sure we can complete it all today," Martin said, "but we'll sure try."<sup>40</sup>

"No, you better complete it today," Kissinger replied. The secretary promised authorization within twenty minutes. The execute order for Frequent Wind reached Pacific Command at 10:51 a.m. Saigon time. After some delay in forwarding the order to participating units, the operation launched, with the first wave of Marine and Air Force helicopters arriving at the DAO compound at Tan Son Nhut at 1:50 p.m. Saigon time, landing to the cheers of awaiting evacuees.<sup>41</sup>

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launched. With fuel in short supply, most had no choice but to chart course for U-Tapao. One with full tanks headed for Brunei. Robbins, *Air America*, 282–88.

<sup>39</sup> *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2010), v. 10, doc. 268 (hereafter *FRUS 1969–76*), <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v10/d268>.

<sup>40</sup> *FRUS 1969–76*, v. 10, doc. 270, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v10/d270>.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.* (quote); *Marines in Vietnam 1973–75*, 183, 185; 9th MAB chron.

Numbers in Air Force and Marine histories differ, but from the afternoon of April 29 through the early hours of the 30th, U.S. military helicopters flew either 662 or 682 sorties. According to one of these accountings, USMC CH-53s and CH-46s completed 556 flights, while Marine Cobra Gunships flew 24 armed escort sorties. Eight USAF CH-53s of the 21st Special Operations Squadron and two HH-53s of the 40th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron made 82 trips from and to the USS *Midway*. USAF tactical fighters from Thai bases and U.S. Navy ones from carriers were airborne flying cover for the full operation, which lasted almost eighteen hours. Sorties for both rescue and cover for the operation totaled 1,422 flights over Saigon. Together, USMC and USAF crews were credited with evacuating nearly 5,000 people (395 Americans) from the DAO compound at the airport and more than 2,000 from the U.S. embassy grounds—978 Americans and 1,120 from other countries, including Vietnamese. (Because of the chaos of the day, those involved with the operations believed that these numbers were underreported.)<sup>42</sup>

Task Force 76 from the U.S. Navy's Seventh Fleet, which consisted of forty-six ships, had anchored off the coast near Vung Tau, about seventy-five air miles southeast of Saigon, joined by carriers USS *Midway* and USS *Hancock*, which together launched and received the majority of the rotary-wing missions. Flight time each way was forty-five to fifty minutes. A Marine officer involved in operational planning recounted that "the air flow went perfectly. It was absolutely remarkable."<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> *Last Flight from Saigon*, 122–23; *Marines in Vietnam 1973–75*, 199–202; Muir, *End of Saga*, 19–27 (quote, 19). F-4s from the 432d Tactical Fighter Wing at Udorn flew fifty-three sorties on April 29. They had been on alert for the potential of this mission since April 19. McAdoo report. Historian Joe Guilmartin, who piloted one of the USAF HH-53s on April 29, later wrote that the official figure of 7,815 extracted by helicopter "is surely low," noting that the command and control system overloaded on the final day, and many of the helicopter crews "simply stopped reporting" the numbers of people they were transporting. *Air America* (CIA), 20 n. 5. Operational control of the Marine missions was vested in USAF while over land (Seventh Air Force, in command of USSAG) but the Navy once the flights reached the South China Sea. USAF helicopter missions remained under USAF control. Muir, *End of Saga*, 24–25.

<sup>43</sup> *Last Flight from Saigon*, 122–23; *Marines in Vietnam 1973–75*, 199–202; 9th MAB chron; Muir, *End of Saga*, 19–27 (quote, 19). The ten USAF helicopters flew from the *Midway*. They had no rotor-blade folding

Ambassador Martin, who had told the Marines just days earlier that only around 100 would be airlifted by helicopter, changed his requirement at the last minute to 2,000 just from the embassy, with the number requested from the Evacuation Control Center remaining at 2,000 for hours even as helicopters carried load after load from the embassy grounds. To the end, Martin's requests and decisions frustrated those involved. Colonel Reed of Seventh Air Force wrote that "the failure of the ambassador to group the evacuees in the selected area [DAO compound] extended the operation unnecessarily and unduly risked the lives of the evacuees." He added that "this factor was partially due to the late decision by the ambassador to request the military option." The command chronology of the Marine helicopter unit involved noted that the number of evacuees at the embassy "far exceeded any planned anticipations" and reiterated that only 100 evacuees—all Americans—had been expected there. Extraction flights from the embassy compound did not commence until 5:40 p.m.<sup>44</sup>

With chaos in the streets of Saigon on April 29, many Americans could not get to the designated areas, nor could they get from the embassy to Tan Son Nhut, necessitating Marine and Air Force landings at the embassy. Air America had twenty UH-1s flying around the city, landing on rooftops or in fields to pick up stranded Americans as well as South Vietnamese who had been approved for evacuation.<sup>45</sup>

Even with the operation underway, Martin continued to hamper rescue efforts and infuriate senior leaders in Washington. Despite orders to prioritize the departure of the Americans, the ambassador instead had insisted that many of them be among the

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mechanism like their Marine counterparts, so they covered the flight deck. The *Midway* had kept half of its air wing on board, but the planes had no way to launch unless the USAF helicopters were airborne. Muir, *End of the Saga*, 20.

<sup>44</sup> *Last Flight from Saigon*, 106; Reed report; 9th MAB chron. The official number of evacuees extracted from the embassy compound ended up being 2,098.

<sup>45</sup> *Air America* (CIA), 11, 19–20, 32–34; Robbins, *Air America*, 275, 288–94. A famous photo of the evacuation that shows people climbing to a rooftop to board helicopter transport on a small pad has often been misidentified as being at the U.S. embassy. The scene actually was an Air America extraction from an apartment complex.

last to leave, a gesture he hoped would embolden the South Vietnamese. “Can someone tell me what the hell is going on?” Kissinger bellowed when he learned of Vietnamese rushing helicopters at the embassy. “The orders are that only American are to be evacuated.” When Gen. George S. Brown, USAF, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, pressed Kissinger on why Martin wasn’t evacuating the Americans, the secretary shouted, “Those are his bloody orders, goddamit!” He added that “I’ll instruct the ambassador to get those people out, but he’s been ordered to get those people out a hundred times.”<sup>46</sup>

At 2:15 a.m. Saigon time on April 30, as one CH-46 and one CH-53 were landing at the embassy grounds every ten minutes (only the smaller CH-46s could actually land on the rooftop helipad), embassy personnel indicated to Washington that nineteen more flights would be needed to complete the evacuation. President Ford ordered at 3:27 a.m. that there be no more flights beyond that number and that Ambassador Martin be on the last one, which he was at 4:58 a.m. One Marine CH-46 was still to come, however, to pick up the Marines who had been guarding the embassy and loading the helicopters, as well as five Army officers. These troops had to ward off South Vietnamese who were desperately trying to reach the roof before they boarded the last flight, which lifted off from the embassy at 7:46 a.m. At 10:24 a.m., the interim South Vietnamese government surrendered unconditionally.<sup>47</sup>

The Marine command chronology observed that while Frequent Wind was “an imminently successful undertaking,” it was also “a sad experience since many of those

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<sup>46</sup> Schulzinger, *Time for War*, 326–27. When Pacific Command and Seventh Air Force asked the Evacuation Control Center for updates, all that the ECC personnel could relay were Martin’s perpetual reports that 2,000 remained to be evacuated, even after more than six hours of operations. *Last Flight from Saigon*, 106.

<sup>47</sup> *Marines in Vietnam 1973–75*, 199–201; Snepp, *Decent Interval*, 562; 9th MAB chron. The United States left behind approximately 400 Vietnamese and South Korean embassy personnel. They could have been extracted with just six more CH-53 flights, but offsite U.S. commanders of the operation were not informed about them and did not order the sorties. Kissinger wrote of being “stunned” when he found out twenty years later about the 400 left behind. He blamed Martin for lack of communication. Muir, *End of the Saga*, 27; Kissinger, *Ending the Vietnam War*, 552–53.

who participated were also veterans of previous years where they had labored and fought in support of the Republic of Vietnam.”<sup>48</sup>

The final estimate of people evacuated from Vietnam in April 1975—Americans, Vietnamese, and foreign nationals—was 130,000, which included tens of thousands who fled by ship or boat, including South Vietnamese naval vessels, which joined the Seventh Fleet flotilla in the South China Sea. Evacuation was just the first step of what became known as Operation New Life. The USAF moved the refugees to the initial processing points at Clark Air Base in the Philippines; Naval Air Station Cubi Point in the Philippines; Air Force and Navy bases on Guam; Wake Island Airfield; and Hickam Air Force Base in Hawaii. From there, flights carried the refugees to Camp Pendleton, CA; Fort Chaffee, AK, Eglin Air Force Base, FL; and Indiantown Gap, PA. Military Airlift Command sorties across Operations Frequent Wind and New Life totaled more than 19,000 flights.<sup>49</sup>

The extraction of Americans and Vietnamese was a monumental effort by the Air Force, Marines, and Navy given the constraints, and ultimately the chaos, under which they had to operate. As they had throughout the conflict, U.S. personnel performed their duties admirably and efficiently despite ever-evolving conditions and ever-changing orders from higher levels. President Ford privately called the fixed-wing airlift “magnificently done.” As for the larger picture, historian George Herring observed that “the American evacuation of Saigon revealed in microcosm much of the delusion, frustration, and tragedy that had marked the American experience in

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<sup>48</sup> MAB chron.

<sup>49</sup> *Last Flight from Saigon*, vii, 123; *Marines in Vietnam 1973–75*, 204. For processing of the refugees, see *Marines in Vietnam 1973–75*, 204–35; Muir, *End of the Saga*, 45–51; U.S. Army Operations and Readiness Directorate, *Operations New Life/New Arrivals: U.S. Army Support to the Indochinese Refugee Program, 1 April 1975–1 June 1976* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1977), <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/tr/pdf/ADA036359.pdf>.

Vietnam.” Those final days and hours were “a tragic epitaph for twenty-five years of U.S. involvement.”<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> *FRUS 1969–76*, v. 10, doc. 267 (Ford quote), <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v10/d267>; Herring, *America’s Longest War*, 336–37. One brief but tragic coda remained for U.S. servicemen in Southeast Asia. On May 12, troops of the Cambodian Khmer Rouge seized the U.S. container ship *SS Mayaguez* in international waters in the Gulf of Thailand. During ultimately successful recovery efforts of the ship and its crew on May 13–15, which basically consisted of USAF rotary-wing transport of U.S. Marines from U.S. Navy vessels, four USAF helicopters crashed, one due to mechanical failure and three to hostile fire. Twenty-three USAF airmen died in the first incident. Eleven Marines, two Navy corpsmen, and two additional USAF airmen died in action, with three Marines missing and presumed dead. John F. Guilmartin, *A Very Short War: The Mayaguez and the Battle of Koh Tang* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1995). For USAF involvement, see USAF Southeast Asia Monograph Series, Vol. 3, Monograph 5, *Fourteen Hours at Koh Tang* (Washington, DC: Office of Air Force History, 1985), <https://media.defense.gov/2010/Oct/13/2001330009/-1/-1/0/AFD-101013-043.pdf>.