1) The last weeks: the evacuation of South Vietnamese cities

While the second part of the file *Air America in South Vietnam* ended with a China Airlines C-123K shot down by the Communists in January 75, this third part begins with a photo that shows a very famous scene – an Air America helicopter evacuating people from the rooftop of the Pittman Building at Saigon on 29 April 75 –, taken however from a different angle by French photographer Philippe Buffon. Both moments illustrate the situation that characterized South Vietnam in 1975. As nobody wanted to see the warnings given by all
those aircraft downed and shot at, the only way left at the end was evacuation. For with so many aircraft of Air America, China Airlines and even ICCS Air Services shot down by Communists after the Cease-fire-agreement of January 1973, with so much fighting in the South that occurred in 1973 and 1974 in spite of the Cease-fire-agreement, nobody should have been surprised when North Vietnam overran the South in March and April 75. Indeed, people who knew the situation in South Vietnam like Major General John E. Murray, US Defense Attaché at Saigon, constantly warned the U.S. Government about the weakness of the South and the growing strength of North Vietnam.

But their warnings were not listened in the US: So President Nixon signed Public Law 93-52, cutting off funds for direct or indirect combat activities by US military forces in South East Asia, effective 15 August 1973. Also on 15 August 1973, the US Congress’s Cooper-Church Amendment stripped the US President of authority to commit forces into Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, including a congressional ban on use of aerial weapons in South East Asia. Furthermore, opposition to the war was so high by now, that it became unlikely that South Vietnam would get all the financial or other aid necessary to guarantee the peace. On 7 November 1973, US Congress’s War Powers Resolution made it illegal to commit US forces for more than 60 days without congressional approval, and in South and North Vietnam it was known that the Congress had very strong anti-war feelings.

In South Vietnam, however, the fighting went on in spite of the Cease-fire agreement of January 1973, but now, the war became a civil war again, as most of the US military advisors had left the country – except Air America, whose subsidiary ICCS Air Services had to fly around the people of the International Commission of Control and Supervision. In October 73, the North Vietnamese Central Committee’s 21st Plenum decided to “liberate”, i.e. to conquer the South. In early November 1973, North Vietnamese troops started invading South Vietnam. Nevertheless, for some time, the United States continued to furnish weapons and aircraft to South Vietnam, but when the negotiations between South and North Vietnam that had been established by the Paris agreement stopped in April 1974, the flow of new weapons to South Vietnam was reduced. In early 1974, tourists coming to sunny Vietnam could see an occasional South Vietnamese Air Force A-37B or F-5 taking off with a bomb-load. Small-scale fighting was taking place regularly in the north-west portion of South Vietnam. In March 74, eight more F-5Es were delivered to South Vietnam, before Congress cracked down. By mid-1974, the fighting between the South Vietnamese troops on one side and the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese troops on the other regained the same intensity as before the Cease-fire agreement – but now, the war was led without the assistance of US troops, so that the North was able to conquer one province after another. The amount of aid to be received by South Vietnam was further reduced after President Nixon’s resignation in August 74. Unable to operate all their aircraft, over 200 aircraft of the South Vietnamese Air Force were retired to flyable storage in 1974, including A-1s, O-1s, C-7s, C-47s and C-119s. Aid cuts took effect just at the time when North Vietnam launched a series of raids. But probably nothing would have helped South Vietnam, because at that time, North Vietnam had already 13 divisions in the South. In the autumn of 1974, the airfield of Song Be, some 100 miles north of Saigon, was taken over by the North Vietnamese Army; in December 74, the provincial capital of Phuoc Binh was besieged and fell on 6 January 1975. Apparently, “the purpose of the operation was less to acquire control of territory in the south than to test the willingness of the

1 In his Safety Monthly Report for January 75, G.J. Keller, Manager of Safety South Vietnam Division, listed some 30 cases of unfriendly actions against Air America aircraft, mostly by small arms fire, but also by mortars and rockets (see http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/1818029/197520.pdf).
2 Trest, Air Commando One, p.234.
United States to respond to a blatant violation of the peace agreement." Nevertheless, the US Congress refused to spend the $300 million aid for South Vietnam that had been requested by US President Ford. And although there were still many US aircraft based in Thailand and although many of the US aircraft carriers were still based in the Gulf of Tonkin, this was more a gesture than of real help for South Vietnam. Evacuation plans had been elaborated for every US embassy and consulate abroad, and the real function of those aircraft and of the fleet was to support such an evacuation in South East Asia, should it become necessary.

This situation of weakness was exploited by the North, when, on 28 February 1975, massive North Vietnamese troops suddenly crossed the border between North and South Vietnam and overran the whole country. On 14 March, Ban Me Thuot was captured. Ed Adams, who was Air America’s Station Manager at Nha Trang at that time, recalls: “Our first indication that things were not going well was when the NVA crossed out of Cambodia and overran Ban Me Thuot. I was rousted out early one morning and advised that the senior U.S. rep. in BMT had radioed that the city was being overrun and things looked bleak. I called Manny DeGusman, my Lead Mechanic, and asked that he startup N-54U, my Station VTB-18, for an immediate departure. Within minutes I was airborne for the 30-minute flight to BMT. Arriving overhead, I established contact with the Rep. Ron Struheric who reported he was safe in his villa/office – but was surrounded by NVA. I could see an M-54 Russian tank parked in front of his house with the cannon barrel pointed at the gate. At about that time, I observed what appeared to be 37MM anti-aircraft bursts above my aircraft. I was at about 10,000' and the bursts appeared to be at 12 to 13,000. I dove away [rather immediately] and then climbed to about 15,000 before I returned. The AA bursts were now below me and off to one side. I stayed in the area I was in – and apparently they could not track me at that location, as the bursts never came any closer. I stayed overhead from dawn to dusk, except for returns to Nha Trang for fuel, for the next week or 10 days. Struheric was still OK, and the NVA did not force their way into his compound. Finally the battery on his radio went dead and I lost contact. Wishing him the best, I also signed off and ceased my vigil. I later learned he was taken prisoner and held until the general POW repatriation.

On 18 March 75, Pleiku was taken by the North Vietnamese. The same day, Air America’s Nha Trang Station Manager Ed Adams made one last landing there: “The next situation, a few days later, was the report of Pleiku had been overrun. I got airborne and worked my way overhead the road to Pleiku. Lots of refugees were spotted, but no open hostilities were noted. About noon, I was requested to return to Nha Trang. Upon arrival, I was advised that some very sensitive material had been left behind in the small bunker beside the runway, and would I see if I could get two customer chaps in to destroy it. Again, going up the road, I encountered no hostile action and flying in circles – ever getting closer to the airport – I came overhead the airport with no sign of ground fire and no hoorah observed at the airport. I told the guys to get ready, and plunked my aircraft on the end of the runway, screeched to a halt beside the bunker, and they jumped out. Leaving the aircraft running, I also got out. By actual count, I noticed 14,428 locals headed toward us – all ARVN or civilians. The first group to reach the plane, were a group of 5 ARVN. I asked them [Ugh Ugh and Pointy-Talky] if they wanted out. They emphatically indicated that they did. I again P-T’d

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5 Dorr / Bishop, Vietnam air war debrief, pp. 214-21.
6 Dorr / Bishop, Vietnam air war debrief, p. 220.
to them that if they kept the other 14,423 people away from the aircraft, they were more than welcome to accompany us. With a few well chosen bursts from their M-1 carbines [overhead the crowd] they stopped the horde in their tracks. About that time there was a rather large explosion in the bunker [which caused me to damn near jump out of my boots] and my two original guys came sprinting back and climbed aboard. I was already in the cockpit and yelled for them to let the 5 ARVN on board – which they did – and we were rolling before the door was fully closed, and airborne just as it was.\(^9\)

The subsequent days are remembered by Air America’s Danang Station Manager Marius Burke: “It really began on the 17th of March. Reports had been received regarding heavier than normal unfriendly activity between Hue and Quang Tri. The more information received, the less inclined was I to launch the scheduled ICCS helicopter to Quang Tri that morning. Contact was made with the Indonesian Air Ops representative to discuss the matter. He blandly informed me that a chopper was not required since all the delegates had abandoned Quang Tri the night before and had gone by road to Hue! They didn’t realize there was any need to contact us. […] On the 23rd, an urgent call was received to get all remaining customers out due to heavy activity in the area. This was accomplished. Hue was considered lost as of the evening of the 23rd.”\(^10\) On 24 March, “one helicopter was launched for Quang Ngai early in the morning for normal administrative purposes. The windshield wipers burned out en route and because of the adverse weather the crew aborted the mission and returned to Danang. A few hours later word was received that Quang Ngai was under attack and an evacuation of all appropriate personnel was necessary immediately. Two aircraft were launched in an attempt to get through the weather. A low level flight over the water was effected and 3 shuttles were made from Quang Ngai to Chu Lai with personnel and records. Quang Ngai was written off that afternoon.”\(^11\) Hue was overrun on 25 March. Then Quang Ngai and Chu Lai were “given up without a fight and abandoned by the disorderly retreating South Vietnamese troops. South Vietnamese troops flee in a state of panic firing upon the last Air America helicopter to lift off Chulai. The fire from friendly forces damages the aircraft but the pilot manages to nurse his sick bird to Danang.”\(^12\)

In the meantime, the main function of Air America’s pilots had become flying evacuation flights. But an orderly evacuation of “sensitive” people who had worked for the US was only possible the first day; the second day, disorganization would show, and the third day, panic and anarchy among the Vietnamese who were afraid to be killed if captured, created a situation of chaos, whenever an Air America airplane or helicopter landed in one of the beleaguered cities of South Vietnam. The aircraft were mobbed by people who attempted to escape, and in some cities, even South Vietnamese troops ran berserk and fired upon civilians and Air America aircraft. Art Kenyon, who flew evacuation missions in an Air America C-46, recalls: “The evacuations were pretty frightening. […] The crowd would be in a panic, completely uncontrolled. We would pull away the stairs and close the doors of our C-46 and people would hoist one another up onto the wings and beat on the windows trying to get in.”\(^13\) All aircraft carried many more people than normally allowed: “A C-46 was equipped to carry 51 people, but a pilot came out of Pleiku carrying 142 fully armed combat troops […] The C-47s, which usually carried a maximum of 30, took on as many as 80 people. Bird Air flew a DC-6 on an evacuation flight and reported 340 people on it.”\(^14\)

\(^10\) Burke, “The Danang Fiasco”, in: UTD/LaShomb/B8F4. On 26 March, Hue was also abandoned by South Vietnamese troops, leaving more than $1 billion worth of US supplied arms to the Communists (Dorr / Bishop, Vietnam air war debrief, p. 220).
\(^12\) Harnage, A thousand faces, p.132.
\(^13\) Robbins, Air America, p. 274.
\(^14\) Robbins, Air America, p. 275.
The evacuation of Danang was the worst. Air America’s Marius Burke recalls: “On the 25th a recon flight was made with the object of looking for alternative landing areas in the event an evacuation of Danang was necessary. […] It was obvious that nonessential people had to be evacuated. Extra Company aircraft began coming up but no seat belt waiver was authorized. It took a great deal of time and effort to convey the seriousness of the situation to the folks in Saigon. Finally, a waiver was given and we were able to legally add more people.”

Tickets were issued to Vietnamese for the regular Air America run, and the airlift began quite smoothly: Together with World Airways Boeing 727s, Air America C-47s shuttled in and out throughout the first day without much trouble, but when the crowd became too big, people began to panic thinking that every plane was the last. So they did not want to let an aircraft leave, making an orderly operation difficult. Indeed, on 26 March, the situation became critical: “Just before dawn on the 26th, about 3-400 refugees from Quang Tri and Hue appeared on our ramp and informed me that they were waiting to go out on the airlift. I spoke to their representative who stated that they were given approval to come aboard base by the Base Security Officer. I managed to convince them to clear the ramp and they then set up camp outside our gate. As the airlift progressed this crowd seemed to act as a catalyst and pretty soon there were literally thousands of them and they began breaking through the barriers we had erected as aircraft came in to the ramp. […] Games had to be played because the ramp was overrun with people. Aircraft were told to park at various areas of the field, passengers bussed out, etc. Finally, the Congen [= U.S. Consul General], Mr. Francis, attempted to appease the refugees by dedicating the next arriving 727 solely for their use if they would promise to maintain order. This gambit failed, with the result that on the 27th he called off the World Airways airlift. Attempts were still made with Company aircraft, with marginal success. By this time VNAF had compromised all our radio frequencies and as soon as an aircraft landed they would be hot on its heels with a caravan of vehicles loaded with their people.”

In addition to the enormous crowd of people – refugees and South Vietnamese military – waiting to be flown out by Air America, there were also other problems, as Air America’s Marius Burke recalls: “Communications and coordination between my office and the OSA warehouse next door became increasingly difficult and reached the point where I was forced to take over air operations in essence.” Communication problems with Saigon meant that aircraft were still coming up with more cargo: “None of the cargo was required or utilized due to the evacuation situation; the unloading process simply slowed down the airlift and clogged up our ramps.” The next problem was the range of the helicopters that were available: The Bell 204Bs registered in the N1303X series (“Xray models”) “had small fuel tanks with resulting smaller range”, while the Bell 204Bs registered in the N8512F series (“Foxtrot models”) were longer ranged. “In the end we had one ICCS H model [= UH-1H], 2 Xray models and 1 Foxtrot model. […] The day after Quang Ngai fell [that is on 25th March], I dispatched Capt. Braithwaite to Saigon with our 5th aircraft, an Xray model that had been replaced by a Foxtrot model the day before. With the loss of Quang Ngai, refueling became a major consideration for Xray models. Chu Lai was reported to be secure so scheduled as a refueling point to enable the aircraft to make it to Qui Nhon. Braithwaite’s aircraft was loaded with evacuees and launched. As he attempted to refuel at Chu Lai, unfriendly elements opened fire, wounding his F/A and one passenger. He managed to get airborne and return to

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16 Robbins, Air America, pp. 276/7.
17 Burke, “The Danang Fiasco”, in: UTD/LaShomb/B8F4.
18 OSA: Office of the Special Assistant to the Ambassador, believed to stand for the CIA.
20 Burke, “The Danang Fiasco”, in: UTD/LaShomb/B8F4.
In order not to be helpless in such a situation, Air America’s Danang Station had tried to put together a number of fuel drums, because in the meantime, the South Vietnamese guards did no longer allow civilians to enter the ramp at night: “On the night of the 26th a number of late evening admin flights were made, the last aircraft landing after 8PM. Shell had agreed to retain enough people to support us if we promised to see they were evacuated. However, on this evening, we ran into problems. Access to our ramp by normal means was blocked off: curfew. The only way to get to it was to go to the end of the field and come up the taxiway. The tower refused Shell to do this.”

In the evening of the 27th, the same happened to some of Air America’s Filipino mechanics who had gone downtown, and almost even to Air America’s Station Manager Marius Burke. In the early morning of the 28th, all OSA people were asked to leave the base.

“The previous day [that is on the 27th] the strip at Marble Mountain had been cleared of debris for possible contingency use and time distance planning had been accomplished for what appeared the only viable alternate destination after leaving Danang: Cu Le Re Island. During the night, all AAM personnel surreptitiously carried hand luggage aboard the helicopters. They then waited behind the hangar. It was planned to attempt departure just prior to daylight with all 4 aircraft taking off at the same time. […] Fortunately, we had enough edge to accomplish just that, although by the time we were lifting off the crowd was heading for us en masse and quite a few were hanging on the skids as we departed. Fog was just beginning to form. Contact was made with Company aircraft en route. One C-46 almost over Danang was advised of the situation and asked to attempt a landing at Marble Mountain to pick up our passengers. The aircraft landed just prior to the runway being masked completely by fog. Two more trips were made to the AAM ramp in an attempt to police up any recognizable stragglers. This was difficult inasmuch as it was necessary to hover over what was now a panicky crowd and try to snatch up only those people we could identify. We were almost dragged down many times and naturally ended up with many people we didn’t want.”

On their way to Marble Mountain, the Air America helicopters were asked to rescue the OSA people, as they could not get off base. So they were told to proceed to the tennis court area, where they were picked up and brought to Marble Mountain. “All was still quiet at this strip and the C-46 departed after being fully loaded.”

When the helicopters were low on fuel, they departed for Cu Le Re Island. Bell 204B N8512F returned to Marble Mountain, however, and the pilot was picked up there by an Air America tanker Volpar and brought to the island. As the Volpar had enough fuel to top off one Bell 204B, Marius Burke and Terry Olson flew back to Danang trying to find other personnel. “Upon arriving in the area we called the tower and asked if they would give us some fuel. Their reply was ‘No fuel for Americans!’”, but after some negotiation, they finally agreed. Bell 204B N8512F was recovered and refueled. “In return for fuel the tower required one aircraft to work for them hauling military personnel and dependents from the field to Deep Water Pier where barges were docked. During this time contact was made with Mr. Francis and I carried him to various places while he attempted to assist in evacuating additional people”, Marius Burke recalls.

In the afternoon, the US Consul General discovered that one group of “sensitive” Vietnamese had been overlooked and radioed for another Air America flight. But in order to ensure a safe landing for the C-47, he had to accept that some South Vietnamese Army officers and soldiers who manned an artillery battery close to the tarmac could also go out on that flight. So when
the C-47 landed, 93 people jammed themselves onto that last Air America flight out of Danang, and more than half of them were Vietnamese troops.\(^{27}\) When it got dark and the helicopters had to return, the US Consul General refused to board one of them: “We were instructed to come back in the morning to pick him up if he hadn’t already departed by boat at that time. We reluctantly departed for the island where we refueled and proceeded to Nha Trang for the night.”\(^{28}\)

Preparations were made for the next day, that is for 29 March 75. Air America Captain Marius Burke recalls: “Two Foxtrot models were loaded with 4 drums of fuel each for an early morning departure the next day. Capt. Goodwin accompanied me with Capts. Olson and Coalson in the other aircraft. There was to be a Volpar overhead to provide support and communications and a Caribou was to position additional fuel at the island. Danang was a shambles when we arrived. Aircraft, tanks, trucks, etc., were abandoned all over the area. Rockets were impacting at the field and small arms fire was received from all parts of the city. The Consulate was on fire. A search was commenced for Mr. Francis with no success.”\(^{29}\) A group of people was discovered at the French compound, but it was impossible to pick them up. “Since there was no room to land, a low pass was made, snatching two Frenchmen on the skids. Quite a bit of fire was received from the area surrounding the compound as well as from the tanks that were outside the walls. […] We landed on a small sandbar in Danang harbor to hot refuel with hand pumps. […] We were continuing our search [for Mr. Francis] over the city when suddenly a 727 was spotted turning base.\(^{30}\) In spite of all warnings, the World Airways 727 landed at Danang and was immediately surrounded by troops and vehicles.\(^{31}\) Marius Burke informed them that “both runways were now closed and their only chance was to take off on the taxiway from where they were. With this the aircraft started rolling. It narrowly missed a stalled van on the side of the taxiway but a motorcycle coming from the opposite direction ran into the left wing hurling its driver into the infield. The aircraft was still on the ground as it ran off the end of the taxiway, but somehow became airborne after plowing through various small structures at the end of the field. […] However, it seemed that a news photographer had been left behind and we were asked to pick him up. […] The [tower] operator pleaded with us to save the photographer as we were his only chance of getting out. We finally made a low level run in to see if we could spot our man. He was found between runways followed by 6 soldiers, all of them got aboard. The tower operator thanked us profusely and then asked for a favor. If we would pick up his wife and children he would stay behind until his ‘last dying breath’. Couldn’t refuse a request like that under the circumstances so Olson and Coalson, who were about empty, effected a rendezvous and picked up a group of people which fortunately included the tower operator’s family. By this time we were at minimum fuel and had to leave for Cu Le Re Island. […] We refueled at the island and arrived in Nha Trang about 9:30 PM. […] With few exceptions, all our personnel performed admirably. However, a small group of individuals went far beyond the normal call. Without their efforts we wouldn’t have come close to accomplish what was done. 1. Capt. T. Olson, 2. Capt. T. Coalson, 3. Mechanic J. Gil, 4. Mechanic R. Pacariem, 5. Mechanic B. Phee.”\(^{32}\)

The chaotic situation at Danang is illustrated by the dramatic changes that in the 27-30 March 75 period had to be made from Air America’s Advance Schedules for Saigon to the 1st Press version of the same schedules. For 27 March 75, the Advance Schedule lists 2

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27 Robbins, *Air America*, p. 278.
29 Burke, “The Danang Fiasco”, in: UTD/LaShomb/B8F4.
30 Burke, “The Danang Fiasco”, in: UTD/LaShomb/B8F4.
31 This scene is well described in: Harnage, *A thousand faces*, pp.136/7; see the video tape at [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pzcWZ7jIiTg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pzcWZ7jIiTg).
32 Burke, “The Danang Fiasco”, in: UTD/LaShomb/B8F4.
scheduled flights (a Caribou to Can Tho on flights 14/34 and a C-47 to Nha Trang on flights 2N/2S), a C-47 and a Volpar operating at Customer direction (“C”) plus a C-46 for a cargo (“CGO”) mission to be announced. The 1st Press version of the same schedule, published on 26 March at 1600L, lists the same scheduled flights, the Customer-directed Volpar and a C-46 VIP flight, plus no less than 5 “special” flights believed to have been evacuation flights: 2 C-46s (one under USAID contract C-1029 and one under ICCS contract 74-008), one C-47 (under contract C-1029), plus 2 Volpars (one under contract C-1029 and one under contract 74-008). For 28 March 75, the Advance Schedule lists 4 scheduled flights (2 C-46s to Danang – one on flights 501/105 under contract C-1029 and one on ICCS flight 321 –, a C-47 to Nha Trang on flights 2N/2S, and a C-47 to Can Tho on flights 14/34), 3 Customer-directed aircraft (1 Caribou, 1 C-47, and 1 Volpar) plus a Volpar for a “special” flight. The 1st Press version of the same schedule, published on 27 March at 1800L, still has the ICCS C-46 to Danang on flight 321, the C-47 to Nha Trang and one Customer-directed Volpar, but the C-47 to Can Tho had been replaced by a Volpar, and now we have 3 aircraft on “special flights” (1 C-46, 1 C-47, and the Caribou), whose crews are asked to “bring RON gear for poss. RON 1 nite” – no doubt, these were evacuation aircraft. For 29 March 75, even the Advance Schedule lists one C-47 for “emergency”, and the 1st Press Saigon Schedule for 30 March 75 lists one C-46 and one C-47 for “special flights” – probably also evacuation flights.33

34 Harnage, A thousand faces, pp.141/2.

Air America’s Saigon Advance Schedule and 1st Press Schedule for 28 March 1975
(in: UTD/Walker/B31F6)

Nha Trang was to follow soon. “An indicator that Nha Trang is destined to fall is further confirmed by Air Vietnam discontinuing all flights to Qui Nhon and Nha Trang cutting off a very valuable airlift capability, and adding to the already overloaded responsibility of Air America.”34 From the point of view of the US Consulate General, an early evacuation was wise: “Early on April 1, we learned that the South Vietnamese military command had departed Nha Trang. We left helter-skelter the same day, improvising a helicopter landing area at the consulate and taking those Vietnamese employees with us who had the good sense or good fortune to be near at hand. As we departed, Nha Trang was falling into chaos; I vividly recall marauding South Vietnamese soldiers pointing their weapons at us as we
choppered away.” But Air America crews felt left alone by the Consulate, as Marius Burke comments: “The Nha Trang evacuation […] still left us holding the bag. In that particular case, I found myself with one other Air America chopper crew, the only control and coordination left. Everyone else had left, despite the fact that a relatively orderly group of approximately 400-450 people were left on the ramp awaiting evacuation. About that time a DC-8 called in for instructions. It had the capability to take out 5-600 people. Since that would have more than taken care of the people on the ramp, I instructed him to land. This was countermanded by the Consulate General who was no longer on the scene, but en route to Saigon and not familiar with the actual situation at that time. The DC-8 did not land and the 2 choppers were able to shuttle approximately 300 people to a Korean LST [= Landing Ship Tank] in the bay before having to finally depart due to lack of fuel. Another 150 left behind who could have gotten out.”

The Communists took Nha Trang only the following day, on 3 April 75. This situation seems to be reflected by Air America’s Saigon Flight Schedules:

Air America’s Saigon Daily Flight Schedules for 1, 2, and 3 April 75 (1st Press version)
(UTD/Walker/B31F6)

For as late as 3 April 1975, the Advance Schedules, which were always drawn up a couple of days prior to the day they were made for, still list Air America’s scheduled flight nos. 2N/2S Saigon-Nha Trang. But as to the 1st Press Schedules, which were always published in the afternoon the day before, the last one to list a scheduled flight to Nha Trang is that of 1 April 75, which gives flight no.2N/2S to be operated by a C-46 flown by Messrs. A. Wilson, Hines, and Sinh. At the same time, the number of helicopters that were based in Military Region III was augmented: The Advance Schedule for 31 March 75 lists only one Bell 204B; the 1st Press Schedule for 31 March still lists one Bell 204B, but adds: “Bring lunch. Aircraft may be requested to fly all day under Customer direction”. The 1st Press Schedule for 1 April 75 lists 2 Bell 204B for Region III, again asking the crews to bring their lunch with them. On 2 and on 3 April, one Bell 204B was again sent to Region III, each time adding the same advice to

36 Burke, “Evacuation comments and observations”, at: UTD/LaShomb/B8F4.
the crews.\textsuperscript{38} Possibly, these helicopters were intended as back up aircraft, if the evacuation of Nha Trang required more helicopters. To sum up with Oren B. Harnage’s words: “Again, as in Danang, it was not facing enemy opposition that forestalled or complicated the evacuation; rather, the inabilities to meet the promises made and initiate a coordinated plan of departure.”\textsuperscript{39}

2) Saigon and the South in April 75

In more or less the same way, one South Vietnamese city after the other fell to the enemy in April 75, and at the end, only Saigon was left. Although no one in Saigon would have admitted it in public at that time, already by 1 April 75 a large-scale fixed-wing evacuation was under way, using contract airliners and military transports to haul people out of Saigon. Already in late March, some Americans were leaving Saigon: scheduled flights out of Saigon were full, in April 75, the Defense Attaché’s Office (DAO) began to fly out nonessential personnel, and eventually the DAO even began illegally flying undocumented Vietnamese to Clark AFB in the Philippines.\textsuperscript{40} On 3 April, US President Gerald Ford announced “Operation Baby Lift”, which was to evacuate about 2,000 orphans from South Vietnam. One of the first military aircraft to leave was USAF C-5A 68-0218: On 4 April 75, some 300 Vietnamese infants and their escorts boarded the aircraft at Saigon in order to be taken out in “Operation Baby Lift” for adoption in the United States. Fully loaded, the aircraft took off, but when Captain Dennis Traylor had reached 23,000 ft some 10 miles off the Vietnamese coast, the cargo door blew off: Some 50 people were sucked out of the open hatchway or were killed by lack of oxygen. The pilot tried to return to Tan Son Nhut airport, but crash-landed in a rice paddy near the Saigon River. A total of 206 people were killed in the accident, while 175 passengers and the crew survived.\textsuperscript{41} Air America crews who immediately flew to the crash site to pick up wounded included Frank Stergar in his UH-1H,\textsuperscript{42} Art Kenyan,\textsuperscript{43} and Thomas Grady.\textsuperscript{44}

As to the political situation, a young South Vietnamese pilot called Nguyen Thanh Trung changed sides in April 75: On 8 April, he took an F-5E and bombed the presidential palace; he then taught North Vietnamese pilots how to fly captured American aircraft, and on 28 April, some VNAF A-37s were led by him and bombed and strafed Tan Son Nhut’s flight line, damaging several VNAF C-47s and C-119s. The A-37 pilots had been told not to destroy the runway, but just to send the message that it was time to leave now.\textsuperscript{45} But before South Vietnam “went down the tubes”, as somebody put it, Cambodia went first: After President Lon Nol had left Cambodia on 1 April, Sikorsky CH-53As brought out the remaining American Embassy staff and some private US citizens on 12 April in “Operation Eagle Pull.”\textsuperscript{46} In South Vietnam, President Thieu, who had lost the confidence of the population and that of the military, abdicated on 21 April. The presidency was then turned over to Vice

\textsuperscript{38} Saigon Advance Schedules for 31 March and 1, 2, and 3 April 75, Saigon 1\textsuperscript{st} Press Schedules for 31 March and 1, 2, and 3 April 75, all in: UTD/Walker/B31F6.
\textsuperscript{39} Harnage, A thousand faces, p.142.
\textsuperscript{40} (Anonymous), “Fall of Saigon, at: \url{http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fall_of_Saigon}.
\textsuperscript{41} Robbins, Air America, pp. 279-81; Dorr / Bishop, Vietnam air war debrief, pp. 222/3. Harnage (A thousand faces, p. 144) says. “The accident took the lives of 200 orphans and 44 of the 45 DAO escorts.”
\textsuperscript{42} Memo of Frank Stergar dated 14 January 94, in: UTD/Stergar/B1F8.
\textsuperscript{43} Robbins, Air America, pp. 279-81.
\textsuperscript{44} Thomas Grady, “Letters home”, at: \url{http://www.air-america.org/Articles/Fall_of_Saigon.shtml}.
\textsuperscript{46} Dorr / Bishop, Vietnam air war debrief, p. 222.
President Tran Van Huong, who prepared for peace talks with North Vietnam. But when his meeting failed, he handed over power to General Duong Van Minh on 28 April 75. However, General Van Minh, too, was unsuccessful in his efforts at reconciliation and could do nothing else but surrender to the Communists, when their troops reached the city of Saigon on 30 April 1975.47

Apparently a lot of people in South Vietnam, including Ambassador Graham Martin, who had lost a son in Vietnam as a soldier and so could not accept the idea that that sacrifice had led to nothing,48 thought that the Communists did not want to destroy Saigon and so hoped that there would be a political solution or some sort of coalition government at the very last moment. This wishful thinking created an optimism that was one of the reasons why the evacuation was also delayed to the very last moment; another important reason for that delay was the fear that it would create panic. While the Pentagon wanted to evacuate as fast as possible to avoid the risk of casualties, Ambassador Martin and the Department of State wanted a quiet and orderly evacuation to prevent chaos and to deflect the possibility of South Vietnamese turning against Americans. And they hoped that a “phased withdrawal” over a period of months could be negotiated with North Vietnam.49 From 20 to 28 April 1975, that is as long as Tan Son Nhut airport was open, USAF C-141s and C-130s as well as World Airways aircraft made the largest fixed-wing evacuation ever undertaken.50 During the same period, 121 South Vietnamese aircraft, including 22 F-5Es, 27 A-37s, and 11 A-1s, were evacuated to U Tapao in Thailand.51

In the meantime, Air America’s activities in South Vietnam had gotten two faces: On the one hand, the Company had to do the usual contract flying, as far as this was still possible due to the decreasing number of open airports, and to make more and more evacuation flights. On the other hand, Air America was a vital part of evacuation planning for Saigon, because only the light Bell 204Bs and UH-1Hs of Air America could land on rooftops, should a massive helicopter evacuation of the capital become necessary. As to Air America’s “regular” activities in April 1975, up to 3 aircraft were regularly based at Can Tho (V-17), most of them flying for customer A40A or USAID, but some of them also for customer A40B or the US Embassy: On 6 April we have 2 Porters (N185K and N192X) plus Bell 204B N1303X, and this picture remained the same for a couple of days. Then, from 11 April onwards, we have only one Porter and Bell 204B N1303X down at Can Tho. On 28 and 29 April 75, 3 UH-1Hs were based at Can Tho: “20104”, “20105”, and “20110”, and some crew members were replaced by new crews as late as 28 April 75.52 No less than 2-3 flights per day went down to Can Tho (V-17), usually a C-47 or Caribou N11014 on flight nos. 14 and 34, a Volpar or another C-47 with additional stops at Bien Hoa (V-02) or Con Son Island (V-32) for customer no. A40H (believed to be the US Navy), and a Porter for USAID, which also brought some deadheads down to V-17. Another Air America destination in the South was An Thoi (V-264) on Phu Quoc Island: On 8 April, Volpar N91295 flew there via Kien Giang (V-167) and returned via Duong Dong (V-165) and Kien Giang (V-167); on 9 April, Caribou N11014 flew to An Thoi (V-264) via Can Tho (V-17); on 10 April, C-46 N67985 flew there twice and C-46 N9458Z even 3 times; on 12 April, Caribou N11014 and C-46 N67985 flew there for USAID; on 13 April, C-47 “559” flew there via Can Tho. Air America’s last aircraft to reach An Thoi

48 Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, in: The Fall of Saigon, video tape, Discovery Channel 1995, at 41 minutes, 20 seconds.
50 Dorr / Bishop, Vietnam air war debrief, p. 221.
51 Trest, Air Commando One, p.251. The idea was to ship as much as possible back to the United States and to give to the Thais all excess aircraft that had been flown to Thailand.
52 Saigon Daily Flight Schedules of 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 28, and 29 April 75, all in: UTD/Walker/B31F6+9.
(V-264) was C-47 “147”, which flew there on 28 April 75 and then returned to Saigon. Apparently, most of these flights carried people who were to be evacuated from Phu Quoc Island by ship. For 29 April 75, no less than 3 aircraft – C-46s N67984 and N67985 as well as C-47 “559” – were scheduled to go to An Theme, but these flights were no longer possible.\(^53\)

Often, Air America flew Saigon-Vung Tau several times a day: On 8 April 75, UH-1Hs “20104” and “20105” flew there for USAID, and C-46 N67985 even went there twice that day. On 9 April, Bell 204B N8514F flew there, as did Volpar N9577Z, which then overflew Nha Trang (V-07), apparently to check the situation. On 10 April, Volpar N91295 flew to Vung Tau and back. On 12 April, UH-1H “20104” operated out of Vung Tau for customer A40H, believed to be the US Navy, and on 13 April, it was Bell 204B N1306X. Another Air America destination served in April 75 was Phan Thiet (V-11): Caribou N11014 flew there on 8 April, and on 11 April, the same aircraft shuttled even 5 times between Phan Thiet and Saigon. On 12 April, Bell 204B N8514F operated out of Phan Thiet (V-11) at the direction of USAID. Also served in that period was Phan Rang (V-28), mostly flight no. 51 for the US Embassy: On 11 April, Volpar N9157Z flew there non-stop, and on 13 April, Volpar N9577Z flew there via Bien Hoa. Several of Air America’s helicopters flew Saigon-Bien Hoa-Tay Ninh City (V-151) on flight nos. 70 and 71, or to helipads like VH515, VH575, VH632, VH665 or VH704, or just to Bien Hoa (V-02). On 10 April, Bell 204B N8535F made a roof landing on its way from Saigon to Bien Hoa. Other helicopter destinations in April 75 included Go Cong (V-203) and Truc Giang (V-14), where UH-1H “20104” flew on 9 April, Ham Tan (V-132), where UH-1H “20110” went on 10 April, and Moc Hoa (V-51), where N1305X went on 13 April.\(^54\)

And there were even some flights into Cambodia in early April 75: On 6 and on 9 April, China Airlines operated C-47 EM-4 from Saigon (V-01) to Phnom Penh (C-01) and then at the direction of customer B40B, believed to be the US Embassy. On 9 April 75, Volpar N7770B flew Saigon – Pursat (C-52) – Siem Reap Alternate (C-02A) – Samrong (C-04)\(^55\) and back to Saigon for the same customer. On 10 April, Volpar N9577Z flew to Phnom Penh (C-01), where it remained at customer’s direction for several hours, until it returned to Saigon.

\(^{53}\) Saigon Daily Flight Schedules of 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 28, and 29 April 75, all in: UTD/Walker/B31F6+9.

\(^{54}\) Saigon Daily Flight Schedules of 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 28, and 29 April 75, all in: UTD/Walker/B31F6+9.

\(^{55}\) Identification of the airport codes: Cambodia Briefing Sheet of 22 August 74, in: UTD/Walker/B26F1.
On some days, Air America operated a couple of scheduled flights for ICCS: For example, on 7 April, UH-1H “20093” was used on flight no. 805A (Saigon-Bien Hoa [V-02]-Long An [V-247]-Bien Hoa [V-02]-Saigon) in the morning and on flight no. 805B (Saigon-Bien Hoa[V-02]-Vung Tau [V-05]-Bien Hoa[V-02]-Saigon) in the afternoon, while UH-1H “16715” flew flight no. 807 (Saigon-Binh Duc [V-183]-Can Tho [V-17]-Binh Duc [V-183]-Saigon), both aircraft operating under the provisions of contract no. 74-008.56

But much of Air America’s “regular” activities was now linked to evacuation or other rescue activities. On most Saigon Daily Flight Schedules of April 75 that have survived, two or three aircraft are scheduled as “stand-by for nite Medevac”: On 6 April, it was Volpar N91295, Bell 204B N1306X, and ICCS UH-1H “16715”; on 7 April, it was Volpar N91295 and Bell 204B N1306X again; on 8 April, we have Volpar N91295, Bell 204B N1305X, and ICCS UH-1H “16715” in that role; on 9 April, it was Volpar N9577Z, Bell 204B N1304X, and ICCS UH-1H “20093”; on 10 April, we have Volpar N9577Z and Bell 204B N1306X; on 11 April, it was Volpar N9577Z, Bell 204B N1304X, and ICCS UH-1H “16715”; and so on.

Air America’s Saigon Daily Flight Schedule for 28 April 1975
(in: UTD/Walker/B31F9)

Even Air America’s schedule for 29 April 75 still had Volpar N7770B and Bell 204B N1306X as stand-by aircraft for nite medevac – although, of course, that day everything took a different direction.57 On most days in April 75, crews were assigned to 2-3 Bell 204Bs that were to remain at Saigon Tan Son Nhut airport as stand-by aircraft during the whole day, to be flown “U/R”, that is “upon request”: On 6 April we have Messrs. Freedman, Grady, and Thanh assigned to N8514F and Messrs. Carpenter, Tuyet, and Tu assigned to N8535F. On 8 April we have Messrs. Cash and Goodwin assigned to N1304X and Messrs. Olson and Braithwaite assigned to N1306X. And on 9 April we have Messrs. Eisler, Tho, and Thong assigned to N8535F and Messrs. Hitchman, Cu, and Tu assigned to UH-1H “20105”. Since 10 April 75, 3 helicopter crews per day were assigned to “airport standby – U/R”: On 10 April we have Messrs. Burke, Tuyet, and Tanh in N1304X, Coalson, Gertz, and Dat in N1305X.

56 Saigon Daily Flight Schedules of 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 28, and 29 April 75, all in: UTD/Walker/B31F6+9.
57 Saigon Daily Flight Schedules of 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 28, and 29 April 75, all in: UTD/Walker/B31F6+9.
and Hitchman, Tuoi, and Phi in N1306X. On 11 April we have Messrs. Cash, Braithwaite, and Thong in N1306X, Caron and Goodwin in N1307X, and Wood, Cu, and Lap in UH-1H “20104”. And on 28 April, we have Messrs. Hunter and Vaughn in N1303X, Kendall and Caron in N8512F, and Weiss and Gartz in N8513F. A similar schedule had been made for 29 April 75 – Messrs. Braithwaite and Carpenter were to fly N1306X, Messrs. Fonburg and Coalson N8512F, and Messrs. Hunter and Spencer N8513F; but then, everything took a different direction.58 For some rescue missions, details are known: On 16 April 75, a CIA paramilitary officer operating as “Lew James” was captured by the North Vietnamese, when they took Phan Rang. At first it was thought in Saigon that he had escaped or been killed. When it became obvious however that he had disappeared, Air America “took to the air for the next two days in planes and helicopters in a hazardous search-and-rescue-attempt. AA planes scouring the shoreline buzzed North Vietnamese troops on the march on the coastal highways, and when a Volpar swooped too low over a column of troops, several AK-47 rounds ripped through the wing. The pilot was forced to make an emergency landing on the beach several miles away, where the crew and CIA officer aboard were later picked up by an AA Huey. There were no casualties but the search was called off.”59 This may have been the same accident that Fred Walker reports in his diary: “21 [April 75:] Jim Voyles shot up in VTB today vicinity Phan Rang (enemy airport) put out may day. I called for helicopters, 2500, 2000, 1000 ft. but landed OK at Vung Tau, V05.”60

Apparently, there were also some more secret evacuations: “Curiously, the first major ‘black’ airlift undertaken in complete secrecy at this time by Air America was not for the Embassy’s vulnerable local employees but for those of Saigon’s American news organizations. […] Air America flew out 600 Vietnamese over the next few days and not a word about the operation leaked out to the public. The press ‘shuttle’ turned out to be one of the Embassy’s most successful evacuation operations. There was also a secret AA run into Thailand with the families of the CIA-trained technicians who worked for the Vietnamese Ministry of Defense, when 143 passengers, mostly women and children, were flown out. […] There were one or two flights every day from April 20 onward. […] After dark on April 21 AA C-46s and C-47s began to ferry the staffs of the CIA propaganda radio station to Phu Quoc Island off the Delta. […] Altogether there were 144 Vietnamese employees who had to be airlifted, together with their families, and after four days AA had moved one thousand people to the island from where they were later taken to Guam by ship.”61

In late April 75, Air America also helped several hundred Filipinos, who wanted to leave South Vietnam with their Vietnamese families, to be evacuated on a Filipino Landing Ship Tank (LST). On 23 April 75, Frank Stergar flew UH-1H “20115” from Saigon to Vung Tau, transporting Filipinos to the Filipino LST. Apparently, their Vietnamese families were not allowed to leave the country. So on 24 April, Stergar flew UH-1H “20103” to Vung Tau to pick up panicky Filipino males off the LST, when they were told that legal wives would meet the LST upon arrival at Subic Bay.62 The problem was solved only on the 26th. Air America’s Marius Burke recalls: “On the 26th of April I went to Vung Tau to try to assist the Filipinos who had taken their Vietnamese families there in an effort to get them on a Filipino LST. As usual, it was ‘no go’ because of Vietnamese refusal to allow departures without proper documentation. Finally, in what was an apparently deteriorating situation, I convinced the Filipino Minister of Affairs, Mr. Sabalones, to allow everyone on the ship regardless of paperwork status. With the use of one helicopter and the assistance of others working for the various customers in the area who allowed them to make shuttles when transiting through, we

58 Saigon Daily Flight Schedules of 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 28, and 29 April 75, all in: UTD/Walker/B31F6+9.
59 Robbins, Air America, p.283.
61 Robbins, Air America, pp. 283/4.
were able to move over 600 people to the LST. The remaining 400 were moved by barge during the night.\textsuperscript{63}

On 28 April 75, Air America had three UH-1Hs at Can Tho (V-17): “20104”, “20105”, and “20110”.\textsuperscript{64} A forth helicopter – Bell 204B N8514F flown by Captains Terry Olson and R. C. Goodwin – acted as SAR [= Search and Rescue] bird.\textsuperscript{65} Capt. Gehring, co-pilot of UH-1H “20105”, recalls: “Our Customer ‘Max’ rode with us. Our mission was lifting Vietnamese from various locations in the Vietnam Delta to a U.S. Navy ship located just offshore of the mouth of the branch of the Mekong River on which Can Tho is located. The ship was the \textit{Vancouver}, escorted by the \textit{Pioneer} contender. Our method as arranged by the Customer was to extract people from various random pickup points. The people were loaded into vehicles and driven out of the city while we circled overhead observing. When the vehicles were clear of the city and other highway traffic, they would just stop along the road near a field and start unloading while we made an approach into the field for the pickup. This method worked very well.”\textsuperscript{66} Capt. R.W. Hitchman, the pilot of UH-1H “20105” adds the locations: “The first pick up was twenty miles NW of V17 [= Can Tho], which consisted of eighteen refugees. After taking them to the \textit{Vancouver} LPD II”, dropping them off, and refueling, we went back to V-193, picked up another load, stopped at V-173, refueled and proceeded to rendezvous with the \textit{Vancouver} LPD, dropping the passengers off and refueling, we proceeded back to V-17 [= Can Tho] because of darkness.”\textsuperscript{67} Capt. Olson of Bell 204B N8514F recalls: “My first contact was with helicopter ‘110’ (Taylor and Weiss). They were shuttling evacuees from Can Tho to the USS \textit{Vancouver} located on the 120 degree magnetic bearing from Can Tho and about 10NM offshore. They stated the number of evacuees was more like 200. I then SARed for helicopter ‘105’ (Hitchman and Gehring). Captain Hitchman stated the evacuation of Can Tho […] couldn’t possibly be completed on the 28\textsuperscript{th}. […] All this time, helicopter ‘104’ (Cash and Wood) was bringing customer designated evacuees from outstations into Can Tho. Later, Operations informed us the cockpit crew of 14F was scheduled to replace that of ‘110’ the 29\textsuperscript{th}. Since we were already in the area, we swapped helicopters aboard the \textit{Vancouver}. […] It was shortly after this that the OM [= Operations Manager], Reed Chase, […] advised the 4 helicopters operating in the Can Tho area to RON [= Remain Overnight] there.”\textsuperscript{68}

In some evacuations, problems arose from bureaucratic obstacles and hostile activities at the same time. In the evening of 27 April, Air America’s Marius Burke met Mr. Jim Collins at “259”, that is at “259 Truong Quoc Dung” near Tan Son Nhat airport, a large US Government operated apartment building.\textsuperscript{69} Mr. Collins told him “that he was going to see Mr. Jacobsen at the Embassy the following morning to arrange for evacuation of the Military Academy orphans at Vung Tau.” Mr. Jacobson’s answer was negative. “However, Collins had other contacts and ended up coordinating with Admiral Benton with blanket approval to proceed. This was finalized late on the 28\textsuperscript{th}. Collins arrived at Air America approximately 1730 looking for me to take him to Vung Tau for final coordination. It was understood that AAM indigenous personnel would also have an opportunity to get aboard the ship that would be set up for evacuation purposes. Due to the late hour the only aircraft that had sufficient fuel and was available to go was [Bell 204B N8512F]. […] The Academy people at Vung Tau were contacted and arrangements were made to have a large barge at the docks starting 0630 the

\textsuperscript{63} Burke, “Evacuation comments and observations”, at: UTD/LaShomb/B8F4.
\textsuperscript{64} Saigon Daily Flight Schedules of 28 April 75, all in: UTD/Walker/B31F9.
\textsuperscript{65} Trip report by Capt. Olson, i.e. CIA document no. c5273092, online readable on the CIA website at \url{http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/15/c05273092.pdf} and Trip report by Capt. Goodwin, at \url{http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/15/c05273120.pdf}.
\textsuperscript{66} Gehring trip report at \url{http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/15/c05273122.pdf}.
\textsuperscript{67} Hitchman trip report at \url{http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/15/c05273109.pdf}.
\textsuperscript{68} Olson trip report at \url{http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/15/c05273092.pdf}.
\textsuperscript{69} B.D.Mesecher, Statement dated 13 August 75 sent to Al Wueste, in: UTD/CIA/B17F5.
following morning to transport personnel to an MSC [= Military Sealift Command] ship. I was to be overhead at 0600 to coordinate operations.”

Upon returning to Saigon, Burke was advised not to fly to Tan Son Nhut airport, and so went out to the fleet, where he was allowed to land on the USS Denver. The following morning, on 29 April, “in view of the situation at V-01 [= Tan Son Nhut airport, Saigon] we departed the Denver at 0500, could make no contact with Air America, then proceeded to Vung Tau. Could find no one at the docks, and no barge was in sight. Went to the Academy and was advised that they were waiting for word from Collins. After searching for about an hour and finally making contact with other aircraft at V-01, it became clear that the evacuation was underway. Proceeded to the [USS] Blue Ridge for fuel and also to get a situation update. At 0700 met with Gen. Carey. […] We then departed, checked for information on Collins at V-05 [= Vung Tau] (they were still looking for him) and proceeded to V-01. […] Landed at DAO [Defense Attaché’s Office compound], shut down to brief. Everything was in a turmoil there and it was felt more could be accomplished by proceeding with the evacuation of personnel. Cleared off the Air America ramp and with minimum fuel picked up a load and headed for the ships. Landed on the USS Dubuque to refuel. […] During our next search over V-05 […] checked with the people on the ground with negative results, made another fruitless recon, when suddenly we received transmission on FM 60.00, which was our prearranged contact frequency. However, a Vietnamese was speaking, asking us to land and pick up Mr. Collins. […] A white panel was put out, but […] when we got to about 1000’ off the ground, we received heavy small arms fire. Under the circumstances it appeared that Collins’ radio had been captured and very likely himself also. Proceeded to the Academy and informed the Military people there of the situation and asked them to make another recon on the ground. Picked up what was represented as Collins’ family along with about 15 orphans and brought them out to the ship.”

At that time, Air America’s final evacuation of Saigon had already begun.

Preparations for that final evacuation – Air America’s second big task that month – had already begun in early April 75. When military planners discussed a helicopter evacuation of Saigon, it was evident that only Air America had the aircraft to land on rooftops. On 7 April, veteran helicopter pilot Nikki A. Filippi was Air America’s representative at the Special Planning Group at the DAO Evacuation Control Center (ECC). He was the primary coordinator between Air America and ECC. Air America Captain Marius Burke was the man assigned to organize and formalize the Air America employee evacuation plans, as would relate to getting the foreign employees from their living quarters to Air America’s Tan Son Nhut compound for onward evacuation out of Vietnam. Boyd D. Mesecher, Air America’s Director Technical Services, was responsible for dealing with all factions of the Company evacuation/contingency plans, related to the Third Country Nationals (TCN), including the Chinese Nationals of Air Asia assigned to Air America at Saigon. Filippi’s first responsibility was to survey 37 buildings in downtown Saigon to check if they could be used as helicopter landing zones; 13 of them were selected, and then obstructions like antennas were removed. It was on 16 April that Ed Reid and Nikki Filippi began designing those emergency helicopter pads: “Thirteen of these locations were installed and were directly responsible for the successful Air America helicopter evacuation.”

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70 Burke, “Evacuation comments and observations”, at: UTD/LaShomb/B8F4.
71 Burke, “Evacuation comments and observations”, at: UTD/LaShomb/B8F4.
75 Harnage, A thousand faces, pp.145/6.
made several flights together in April. “Our purpose was to determine which TCN’s lived there in town and which roof tops were the most suitable for use. We formally identified 3 roof tops in Cholon for the employees living in that area and we identified 3 roof tops around the area of Truong Minh Giang/Troung Minh Ky for the balance of the TCN employees.”

Other roof top landing zones were designated by the military staff of ECC, and “we also provided the DAO ECC with our ICCS colored daiglo green paint, so that they could paint the letter H on their designated roof tops. These LZ pads were to be utilized for all the U.S. mission personnel pickup points in the case of an evacuation.”

But then problems arose. Boyd Mesecher notes: “Initially we identified three Cholon building roof tops that were well located and suitable for helicopter use. These were each identified by alphabetical designators. The primary pickup point was the apartment building in which Mr. P. Y. Lin lived, and this roof top was assigned the letter ‘F’ and a large ‘H’ was painted in dayglo green color on the roof, to identify it as a helicopter landing pad. A smaller ‘F’ was painted in white color, in the upper position of the letter ‘H’. The other two Cholon roof tops were never painted with any letters, as we were unable to obtain formal approval of their use. But all the Chinese employees were appraised of all three roof tops, and the roof tops were identified in our contingency plan map in AAM Flight Information Center. […] Later in the month (about 15 April) […] Capt. Burke and I then held joint meetings with each TCN group and appraised them of the AAM contingency plans. We strongly pointed out to them that it would be questionable to safely use the designated roof tops for employee pickup. The local police had already verbally threatened to shoot down our helicopters, if we tried to use ‘F’ pad in Cholon. Based solely on our concern for the employees, we insisted that all the TCN groups move to the AAM compound at TSN.”

But it was not only the local police who created problems, but also the U.S. Embassy, as Marius Burke points out: “A lot of work was done on preparing the roof top zones. However, although these DZs were already obviously compromised, clearance would not be given to paint the ‘H’s for easy recognition by the pilots. When the evacuation started, it was too late to do so. We painted all six pads well in advance nevertheless. I was continually rebuffed in efforts to have our helicopter shoot approaches and make landings on those pads that were suitable. It was also recommended that choppers be parked overnight with ours RON’ing [= remaining over night] in the building. The reason for this was obvious… get the local population used to such operations, so when the time came to evacuate we might be able to react quickly and also make more than one shuttle, before it became obvious what was going on. Additionally, by so dispersing our helicopters at secure roof tops we reduced the risk of losing our lift capability, should the Air America ramp come under attack or access be denied thereto. These requests were summarily turned down time and again by the Embassy. Again, we took it upon ourselves to at least park one helicopter at 259 Troung Quoc Dung.”

In mid-April 75, Air America evacuation coordinator Marius “Burke and [Ambassador] Martin clashed over evacuation preparations. Burke wanted to mark the rooftops of 32 buildings and wanted his pilots to practice landing and taking off from the rooftops. The ambassador said the moves were gratuitous and would only create tension and worry. […] So Burke did what he thought was right. He started landing on the building where he lived. “I wanted people to get used to seeing the helicopter so they wouldn’t panic when I was forced to land and take off from here”, he said”. And Burke was not the only person to be turned down by the Ambassador at that time: Air America’s CEO Paul Velte, who had arrived at Saigon on 7
April 75, had convinced USAF Brig. Gen. Richard Baughn to request the temporary reassignment of helicopter pilots so that each Air America UH-1 would have a co-pilot. When the Ambassador read the cable, he cancelled that request and ordered Gen. Baughn out of the country. The reason for Ambassador Martin’s actions was probably always the same: He did not tolerate any outward signs that the United States intended to abandon South Vietnam. For the same reason, Air America and not USMC helicopters were used on 25 April to fly 40 marines, dressed in civilian clothes, from the USS Hancock to the DAO compound; their mission was to control the growing crowd of fixed-wing evacuees at Tan Son Nhat airport.

What the Ambassador did not stop, probably because he was unaware of it, were preparations made by Air America to reactivate stored Company aircraft that had to be evacuated one day – this was done about 4 weeks prior to the evacuation. For example, C-47 “083” had been put to inactive storage at Saigon on 1 July 72, C-47 “084” even on 20 June 70, both with 18 days to reactivate. On 29 April 75, both aircraft were flyable again. ICCS paint schemes on UH-1H helicopters, which were no longer on contract, were removed, leaving the aircraft with Company paint scheme, but with black versus blue. Other aircraft like Caribous N539Y and N544Y, which had been stored at Saigon for months, were ferried to Tainan in April 75. The remaining three Bell 205s had been ferried from Udorn to Saigon

Request dated 10 April 75 to issue FAA Certificates of Registration to the Bell 205s (in: UTD/CIA/B17F3)

84 Flight Operations Circular no. DOC-C-74-005 of 1 May 74, in: UTD/Hickler/B8F7C.
86 N539Y: was in inactive storage at Saigon 1-31 May 74 (F.O.C. of 1 May 74, in: UTD/Hickler/B8F7C); to be sold to Masin Aircraft, Cologne, on 23 December 74, but the deal fell thru (Summary of sales, in: UTD/CIA/B40F6); based at Saigon in March 75 (Telex dated 20 March 75, in: UTD/CIA/B18F2); the departure from Saigon to the Continental US was scheduled for 15 April 75 (Telex dated 20 March 75, in: UTD/CIA/B18F2); at Tainan in June 75 (Aircraft list of 12 June 75, in: UTD/CIA/B51F12), N544Y: was in inactive storage at Saigon 1-31 May 74 (F.O.C. of 1 May 74, in: UTD/Hickler/B8F7B+C); to be sold to Masin Aircraft, Cologne, on 23 December 74, but the deal fell thru (Summary of sales, in: UTD/CIA/B40F6); at Hong Kong in 1975; based at Saigon in March 75 (Telex dated 20 March 75, in: UTD/CIA/B18F2); the departure from Saigon to the Continental US was scheduled for 20 April 75 (Telex dated 20 March 75, in: UTD/CIA/B18F2); at Tainan in June 75 (Aircraft list of 12 June 75, in: UTD/CIA/B51F12).
in mid-74. XW-PFG arrived at Saigon in April and was assigned to contract no. AID SA-C-1029 as a call aircraft on 1 May 74, while XW-PFH and XW-PFJ were both ferried Udorn-Bangkok-Phnom Penh-Saigon on 23 June 74. But already on 14 May 74, the Laotian registries of these aircraft had officially been cancelled, and since then these helicopters had been stored at Saigon without registration. But when it became evident that an evacuation of South Vietnam was not that far away, Air America’s Senior Vice President Clyde S. Carter sent a letter to the FAA on 10 April 75, requesting to register the 3 former Laotian Bell 205s as N47000 (former XW-PFG), N47001 (former XW-PFH), and N47004 (former XW-PFJ). Another step taken about a month prior to the evacuation was to designate Con Son Island (V-32) as Alternate V-01, to be utilized as a staging point and/or refueling point, if necessary. This means that fly-away kits – which included commonly used spare parts for each type of aircraft used by Air America – were stored at V-32 together with fuel in 55 gallon drums.

3) The last day in South Vietnam: 29 April 1975
The official plan
At the end, the last day had come for US presence in South Vietnam: In the very early morning of 29 April, Tan Son Nhut airport was hit by rockets and heavy artillery; one of the shells struck and set to fire a USAF C-130 that was taxiing to pick up evacuees. The continuing rocket fire as well as debris on the runways caused by ordnance that had been dropped by a defecting South Vietnamese pilot, made the runways unfit for use. So General Homer D. Smith, the US Defense Attaché at Saigon, informed Ambassador Martin that an evacuation from the airport by fixed-wing aircraft, which the Ambassador had originally intended, was no longer an option. After personally ascertaining the situation at the air base, at 10.48 a.m. Ambassador Martin relayed to Secretary of State Kissinger his desire to activate the helicopter evacuation called Operation Frequent Wind and coded Operation Frequent Wind. According to this plan, CH-53 and CH-46 helicopters were to be used to evacuate Americans and friendly Vietnamese from the DAO compound at the airport to ships waiting in the South China Sea, including the U.S. Seventh Fleet. The song White Christmas permanently played by the US radio had been the signal for American personnel to move to the evacuation points where they were picked up by buses and then brought to the DAO compound. Originally, the US Embassy was just to be an evacuation point, from where people were to be transported to the DAO compound by bus or by helicopter, but during the afternoon, several thousand people were stranded at the Embassy. In the late morning, it was within minutes that Secretary of State Kissinger had given the order to activate Operation Frequent Wind, but confusion within the command structure caused a series of delays. General Carey received the order to execute the operation only by 12.15 p.m., and then the marine security force had to be shifted among the ships. As a result, the first 12 CH-53s did not land at the DAO complex until 3

87 Flight Operations Circular no. DOC-C-74-004 of 1 April 74, in: UTD/Hickler/B8F7C lists XW-PFG as still based at Udorn, while Flight Operations Circular no. DOC-C-74-005 of 1 May 74, in: UTD/Hickler/B8F7C lists it as based at Saigon.
89 Letter dated 10 April 75, sent to the FAA by Air America’s Senior Vice President Clyde S. Carter, in: UTD/CIA/B17F3.
90 Undated aircraft list of late 74, in: UTD/CIA/B49F1.
91 Letter dated 10 April 75, sent to the FAA by Air America’s Senior Vice President Clyde S. Carter, in: UTD/CIA/B17F3.
93 The original evacuation scheme had been published on 31 July 74 and contained 4 options: I) evacuation by commercial airlift from Tan Son Nhut (TSN) airport, Saigon; II) evacuation by military aircraft from TSN, III) evacuation by ship from ports serving Saigon; and IV) helicopter evacuation to US Navy ships standing offshore (Leary, “Final flights”, p. 4, at: http://www.utdallas.edu/library/specialcollections/jalonick/learylec.pdf ).
p.m. But then the operation finally got under way, and while evacuation from the DAO compound was halted by 23:00, helicopter evacuation from the courtyard of the Embassy stopped only at about 3:45 a.m. in the morning of 30 April 75, after President Ford had ordered Ambassador Martin to board an evacuation helicopter.

**Enter Air America**

When the evacuation by military helicopters finally began at 3 p.m., Air America had already started its own evacuation since a couple of hours. There had been an Air America flight schedule for 29 April 75, but due to the situation at Tan Son Nhut airport this schedule could not be translated into action. At about 6.30 a.m., all Air America pilots were ordered to report at Tan Son Nhut airport at first light; but as shells were still falling at dawn, the South Vietnamese closed the airport to all but military traffic. It was not until at about 9 a.m. that Air America was finally able to fly. Captain Tony Coalson flew over to the USAID building to pick up other Air America pilots. When he landed on the pad, at least nine people climbed on board his Bell 204B N1306X. As he felt that he could not take off vertically, he asked for someone to get off – but nobody did. He asked again, but everybody on board shouted “It’ll go!” “The helicopter would barely hover – 6 to 10 inches – at maximum power. But against

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96 Identification of the aircraft from the list of crews sent to the author by Prof. Bill Leary in his e-mail dated 17 October 2004.
his better judgment, Coalson backed up as far as he could and attempted a jump take off. As he went over the side of the six-story building, his rotor decayed into the red and ‘basically almost quit flying.’ The only option was to nose the aircraft over to gain airspeed and reduce collective to try and regain engine RPMs. Coalson barely managed to avoid the rooftops below. ‘We almost lost the rotary-wing pilots on the first pickup,’ he recalls."97 The times given by Fred Walker are slightly earlier: ‘The powers-that-be finally decided that they would launch a helicopter and the first one off came to 259 about 0830 and picked 10 helicopter pilots off the roof and took them to the airport. Came right back and picked up 6 more. On third trip at 0845 eight fixed wing pilots, including myself, were taken to airport.”98 Another pilot who flew Air America crews from building 259 to the airport was Israel Freedman, who recalls: “I took the nearest aircraft to operations, [N13]03X, and by the time I had the engine running I believe I had at least four other captains on board plus several flight mechanics, which I took immediately to the ICCS ramp to secure those aircraft, as there was no security on that ramp. At that time I believe all available pilots were manning aircraft. I then went to 259 to bring additional crews to the airfield.”99

While other pilots continued to shuttle crews from downtown Saigon to Tan Son Nhat airport, Coalson was asked to pick up 7 passengers at the DAO tennis court and fly them over to the USS Blue Ridge. After refueling on the ship, his co-pilot and his flight mechanic refused to return to Saigon so that Coalson flew solo for the rest of his 10 ½ hour day – “shuttling from the Embassy rooftop to ship with intermeshed trips to DAO, LZ, 23, 259 and internship transport, landing about 1850 on the Hancock. My departure from Saigon was about 0900 with about 5 trips to various ships.”100 At about the same time, 6 helicopters were stolen by VNAF pilots at gunpoint. Boyd Mesecher, Air America’s Director Technical Services, recalls: “I went by AAM helicopter, from my living quarters to AAM TSN at about 0930L on Tuesday 29 April 75. […] Shortly after arriving at AAM TSN, I was notified that VNAF pilots were stealing our GFE [Government furnished equipment] UH-1H helicopters from the ICCS ramp. To the best of my knowledge they stole five (5) UH-1H aircraft from the ICCS/AS ramp and one AAM 204B helicopter from the AAM ramp itself. These VNAF people were well armed and desperate.”101 The 5 UH-1Hs seized by VNAF pilots were “69-16715” (which crashed into the USS Blue Ridge later the same day), “70-15738” (later reappeared in South Korea102), “70-15843” (which crashed shortly after take-off into an area

102 John M. Harris of the US Army recalls: “I am a VHPA member who flew for the Army’s 18th Avn Co. out of Can Tho in 72-73. […] In May 75, I was a CW2 assigned to an Army unit in Uijongbu, South Korea. One day, the maintenance officer said he needed another pilot to go with him to our direct support (DS) unit in Pyongitech and I agreed to go. In passing, he mentioned on the trip down that the DS unit had recently received a UH-1H from Air America. My response was ‘That’s impossible; Saigon fell almost a month ago and here we are in the ROK; how could that have taken place?’ When we got there, I went to a hanger and there it was; this Huey had just been repainted in Army olive drab green. However, it was still possible to see the silver and blue Air America paint behind several inspection panels. I was really amazed that the aircraft had its Army historical logbook still intact; I looked in and verified that there were entries made in 72 while this ship was assigned to the 14th Avn Co., for MWO’s (modification work orders) such as the installation of the IR suppressor kit (toilet bowl exhaust). About this time, one of the test pilots related to us his understanding of how this Huey had made it to South Korea. Apparently, during the fall of Saigon, after making multiple lifts out to the evacuation fleet, the crew found itself running short of fuel. Instead of ditching, they spotted a civil freighter steaming around South Vietnam and elected to land on it, with no commo. The aircraft incurred zero damage and was allowed to stay in place but the ship’s captain advised that his next port of call was to be Inchon, South Korea. The tale was then related to us that when the ship eventually arrived in Inchon, the Captain called the U.S. Embassy in Seoul and said something to the effect that ‘I have a US Government aircraft on my ship; please send someone ASAP
to the immediate rear of the Tan Son Nhut Passenger Terminal), “70-15916”, and “71-20186” (both of which were never seen again).\textsuperscript{103} Probably the stolen Air America UH-1Hs whose fate is unknown also reached the fleet, were taken for South Vietnamese aircraft because of their ICCS colors and were ordered to ditch into the sea – like “69-16715”.\textsuperscript{104} The Bell 204B stolen by VNAF people was N1305X. They later landed it on the USS Kirk, from where it was flown to the USS Okinawa by US Navy pilots.\textsuperscript{105} A 7th Air America helicopter – UH-1H “20093” – was saved by Capt. L. D. Genz from being hijacked by VNAF people. He recalls: “At this time, pilots were flown from the AAM ramp to the ICCS ramp. Small arms fire was heard frequently and rockets and mortar fire was observed. There was several VNAF and ARVN on the ICCS ramp, all of them armed and several of them in the helicopters. When I arrived at the ICCS ramp, I untied and removed the covers from helicopter 093. At this time, 6 armed VNAF forced their way onto 093, demanding they be flown to a ship. I told them it wasn’t possible, but that I would take them to a place where they would be evacuated to safety. I then took off and landed them on the AAM ramp, where they were met and disarmed by Capt. Adams.”\textsuperscript{106} An 8th Air America helicopter – UH-1H “20103” – was saved by Capt. F. Stergar from being hijacked by VNAF people. He recalls: “0850: Assigned to UH1H [20]103 by CPH [= Chief Pilot Helicopters]. When I arrived at the aircraft, I tactfully had to kick out six armed VNAF officers with dependents. They had no intention of getting out of the aircraft until assured I would return and get them. They were later evicted by Capt. Adams and M-16. Two wonderful Chinese shop personnel acted as FMS [= Flight Mechanics] and assisted in departure. After two missions they jumped ship. 0900-1000: Evacuation [of] all personnel from Monterey Apartments. Four trips to this site. 1000: Took CEO [that is Paul Velte] to DAO tennis courts. 1000-1500: Performed various short flights out of DAO tennis courts.”\textsuperscript{107} Capt. Stergar then accompanied Capt. Caron to the USS Vancouver in Bell 205 N47004.\textsuperscript{108}

**Fixed wing evacuation**

At about the same time, Mr. Var Green, Air America’s Vice-President South Vietnam Division (VPSVND) “authorized the evacuation of all fixed wing aircraft and non-essential employees, at or about 1030L. I personally\textsuperscript{109} assisted in the aircraft loading of employees and as best possible attempted to control the actual boarding to avoid personnel injuries and/or panic. The employees were fairly cooperative, especially the TCN groups who had faith that AAM would safely evacuate them. Within some 30 minutes, we had loaded all the non-

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\textsuperscript{103} E-mail dated 2 October 2009 sent by John M. Harris to Judy Porter who kindly forwarded it to the author.

\textsuperscript{104} “Supply Support for Air America Inc”, pp.2-4, a report of June 75 (in: UTD/CIA/B17F5) sent by US Army officers Alfred J. Budris Jr. (Ilmo) and Paul N. Simon (Col.) to the Commanders of the US Army Japan and the US Army Garrison of Okinawa.

\textsuperscript{105} “70-15738” then passed to other US Army units, until it entered AMARC’s scrap yard on 22 September 2000. But its life was not yet over, as on 26 May 2009, it was registered to NWH/Turbines LLC, Olympia, WA as N381TB (request submitted on 2 October 2009 to the FAA at \url{http://registry.faa.gov/aircraft inquiries/}).

\textsuperscript{106} Report at \url{http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/15/c05273121.pdf}.

\textsuperscript{107} Stergar report at \url{http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/15/c05273097.pdf}.

\textsuperscript{108} Stergar report at \url{http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/15/c05273097.pdf}.

\textsuperscript{109} Boyd D. Mesecher, “Statement about the Saigon evacuation of the Air America Inc. (AAM) employees”, sent to Al Wueste, President Air Asia Co Ltd on 13 August 75, p.4, in: UTD/CIA/B17F5.
essential employees at TSN, on AAM fixed wing aircraft, and those aircraft departed. The only employees remaining at TSN were the helicopter pilots and key ground personnel. All available TCN employees were evacuated." According to Fred Walker, the evacuation with Air America fixed wing aircraft began even earlier: “Certain amount of hesitancy about launching fixed wing aircraft, but every explosion outside further convinced me that we had worn out our welcome in Saigon. Waited around and, finally about 0930 we launched C-47 #559 and C-47 #084. Then every 10 minutes or so another AAM fixed wing aircraft took off. I finally got the O.K. to go at 10:05. […] Started engines and taxied over by our hangar and boarded 24 passengers very quickly. […] As Capt. Ed Adams was about to board his C-46, an ARVN soldier tried to forcibly embark. Ed stopped him and the guy started to swing an M-16 around to point at him. The soldier got the gun about half way around when Ed knocked him on his ass (busting his hand in the process) and disarmed him. That ended that. […] At the east-west, north-south taxiway intersection, we found it partially blocked by a completely burnt out USAF C-130. There was just room to get by the tail of this hulk and we made it and swung out onto the runway which, by the grace of God, wasn’t damaged and without further ado took off. With the reds all around town, we gained some altitude over the city then headed for the open sea about 25 miles away to the southeast. […] When I left the ramp at Saigon, there were two C-46’s and two VTB’s still there but they got airborne shortly. The bombing attack the night of the 28th stopped all refueling so we ended up with four C-47’s and two C-46’s and one VTB heading for friendly territory in Thailand. Only one C-47, #083, had full tanks and he headed for Brunei.”

Capt. William H. Huff reports, how C-47 “083” flew from Saigon to Con Son, then on to Brunei on 29 April, then on to Clark AFB on 30 April, and finally from Clark AFB to Tainan on 3 May 75: “We departed TSN [= Tan Son Nhut] at approximately 0300Z 29 April 1975 with 33 passengers (Air America employees and families, mixed VN, Chinese, American and Filipino) plus a crew of two – Captains Forte and Huff. Shortly after takeoff heavy smoke was noted coming from the right engine. At approximately 2000 feet, a slight oil fire developed in the exhaust manifold section and the engine was feathered. The fire went out. We proceeded to Con Son Island for possible repairs or evacuation, arriving there at approximately 0430Z. […] Emergency repairs were effected on the push-rod. […] During our stay at Con Son, and due to the number of refugees arriving by VNAF aircraft, Mr. Ford prepared for possible abandonment of the airplane if repairs proved unfeasible. He had 14 of our passengers removed to the ships by helicopter flown by Captains Olson and Goodwin. Mr. Ford decided and we agreed that it was not feasible to top off our fuel due to the possibility of being mobbed by VN evacuees if the airplane appeared to be being prepared for departure. With the aircraft apparently disabled no one bothered us. By the time the helicopter returned for the second load of passengers, we were ready for run-up. Run-up checked okay, so we re-embarked our remaining passengers and departed immediately for Brunei. […] We departed Con Son at approximately 0700Z and arrived Brunei at approximately 1130Z. […] We had difficulty refueling and did not receive fuel/oil until approximately 0500Z on 30 April. A flight plan was filed for Clark at 0900 local (0100Z) and two delay messages were forwarded prior to our departure at approximately

110 Boyd D. Mesecher, “Statement about the Saigon evacuation of the Air America Inc. (AAM) employees”, sent to Al Wueste, President Air Asia Co Ltd on 13 August 75, pp.4/5, in: UTD/CIA/B17F5.
112 Capt. Terry Olson describes all this in his trip report: “I then picked up Captain Fraser and Jordan of [Caribou N11]014 and arranged with Ford to return ASAP [= as soon as possible] to evacuate Air America personnel and the 5 Americans operating the LORAN station. [N85]14F and ‘105’ followed me from the Barbour County back to Con Son. Myself and ‘105’ each picked up about 15 of ‘083’’s passengers. 083 fixed his engine and left for Brunei with the remaining passengers. 14F picked up Ford, some other Air America employees and the LORAN people. This completed the evacuation of Americans and AAM personnel from Can Tho and Con Son Island. All three helicopters dropped their passengers on the Barbour County, refueled on the fleet near Vung Tau and went to Saigon.” (Olson report http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/15/c05273092.pdf).
0500Z. [...] Despite our flight plan, since we had no diplomatic clearance, the aircraft and crew were impounded upon arrival Clark by the Filipino Government. We arrived at Clark at approximately 1030Z. [...] We departed Clark at approximately 0315Z 3 May 1975 and arrived in Tainan routinely at approximately 0615Z.” One of Air America’s bailed C-47s was flown by Art Kenyon, and this aircraft suffered from a lot of problems during its flight to U-Tapao in Thailand: Still at Saigon, there were problems to start the right-hand engine; during the flight, the hydraulic system blew up; and at the end, problems with the brakes and the landing gear resulted in a crash-landing at U-Tapao. A vivid description of all this can be found in Christopher Robbins’s Air America,114 who gives the aircraft as being C-47 “083”. But the official reports that Air America’s Senior Vice President Clyde S. Carter sent to the USAF and to USAID on 10 October 75 state that the aircraft that had crash-landed at U-Tapao was C-47 “084”. A detailed list of who flew out which Air America transport aircraft to Thailand is preserved in the Fred Walker Papers at the Air America Archives at Richardson, Texas.116

Air America’s fixed wing aircraft did not only evacuate Company personnel and their dependents, “On the 29th, Air America’s fixed wing group took what refugees they could and departed. Shuttling in and out of Saigon was now impossible for fixed wing aircraft.” Ed Adams had been told to fly out Paul Velte in his Volpar, but when he wanted to pick him up at Operations Office, all Air America personnel there had already gone. So Adams went to his Volpar: “I then caught a glimpse of the C-46 that I had loaded with all those people. I could not leave them behind. I did not know who was scheduled to take that airplane out, but it was evident that they were not going to. […] Doing a quick walk around the aircraft to insure all the gust locks etc. were removed [More like a "Hustle" around] I noticed that there were so many people at the aircraft that they could not all fit inside. With a lot of gesticulating and grunts – all those outside – were convinced to push enough to get inside. I then made it up and managed to close the door. This was a ‘T’ category aircraft with a regular airline interior rather than our standard cargo version with no seats. With the 52 seats fully occupied – there were about 5 people to each set of 2 seats, plus people standing in the aisle, plus people in the toilet and in the baggage area in the rear – I figure that I had about 152 pax in a 52 pax aircraft. Not to worry. With much assistance from the people in the seats and in the aisle, I managed to make it to the cockpit. An AAM mechanic was on board – and I am sorry to admit I do not remember his name. He gave me great moral support. […] Both engines started without a burp or a backfire – and we were ready. But then the VTB I had originally meant to take was just in front of us. With a hard turn, I managed to only hit one of the vertical fins, which fortunately bent over with no damage to the C-46. […] Turning around, I considered taking off from the exit taxiway from our ramp. Adding power, I came down the ramp right smartly, hung a right onto the taxiway, looked up and saw a DHC-4 Caribou burning on the

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114 Robbins, Air America, pp.294-98.
115 Letters no. WC-75-2258 and WC-75-2261, both in: UTD/CIA/B17F4; see below.
116 This document, called “Fall of Saigon, Course of Events” (in: UTD/Walker/Binder1.pdf at http://libtreasures.utdallas.edu/xmlui/handle/10735.1/1421 ) gives the following details: C-47s “147” (crew F. F. Walker and S.A.Smith), “559” (crew P. M. Severson and J. F. Voyles) and “084” (crew Z. Radolinski and A. Kenyon) as well as Volpar N91157Z (crew K. D. Nolan and C. Bartlett) flew to U-Tapao, while C-46s N67984 (crew A. D. Wilson, E. Guthrie, and H. Hines) and N67985 (crew E. Adams solo) flew to Bangkok. Among the people flown out to Bangkok were 11 Chinese Air America employees (see: XOXO of 30 April 75, published by the CIA at: http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/15/c05280395.pdf ). Other Air America employees ended up at Hong Kong on 29 April 75, including 3 US citizens, 4 Chinese, 1 Filipino, and 6 South Vietnamese (see: XOXO of 30 April 75, online readable on the CIA website at http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/15/c05280398.pdf); the aircraft involved was an Air America C-46 (see: http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/15/c05280399.pdf).
far end. Cut the power – stand on brakes – make another right turn onto the next taxiway – start to add power again to take off there – and the civil ramp is full of burning aircraft – cut the power – hang a left turn to access runway 36 – turn onto 36 – look up to see a C-130 burning – leave the power on turn onto the grass to cut across to runway 25 – turn onto 25 – lock the tail wheel – and see 14,483 people on the end of the runway [the same people from Pleiku?] – think they may pop a few rounds at us as we go overhead – drop flaps – suck it off way early – hang it right over the grass – gear up – accelerate – flaps up – climb power – breathe. […] Now, in that the airport had come under bombardment the day before and the C-46 I was flying had only just before come in from a trip – it had not been refueled. […] Taking my options, I turned northwest for Thailand. […] Nearing where I believed Bangkok to be, I tried a Center frequency and was pleased to hear Bangkok Center reply. I advised I was inbound to Bangkok and requested clearance. This was immediately given.”

Air America’s helicopter evacuation: the fuel problem

In the meantime, the helicopter evacuation at Saigon continued: “Shortly after 1100L, VP SVND instructed all remaining employees to fly to the U.S. Defense Attaché Office (DAO) compound and continue the U.S. Mission evacuation operation. This decision was necessary because more and more armed VNAF personnel and dependents were penetrating our AAM compound attempting to board our operating aircraft. AAM had previously established an alternate Operations Office in DAO just to cope with such a situation. After arriving at DAO, we continued to use our helicopters to make roof top pickups from the designated buildings in Saigon and flew the U.S. Mission evacuees to the U.S. Navy ships located some 40 miles off shore of the port city of Vung Tau. Some of the U.S. Mission evacuees were flown from the roof tops to DAO, where the larger U.S. Marine helicopters later evacuated them to the waiting U.S. Navy ships. There were about ten of us American employees handling the AAM flight operations at DAO during this period.”

Air America’s Boyd Mesecher recalls: “With incoming rockets and VNAF infiltrating our ramp area, there was no time to collect or destroy essential records. We were hopeful that we could resecure the AAM compound and operate from it, once the marines arrived to secure the area. It was planned and I was so briefed by DAO and the U.S. Marines that the AAM compound would be secured by the U.S. Marines and upon our departure, they would destroy (blow-up) the AAM facilities. Unfortunately for all concerned, the U.S. Marines did neither.” Among the admirers of Air America’s helicopter evacuation is former CIA analyst Frank Snepp, who was stationed at Saigon at the time of the evacuation: “Now these are small helicopters, and the fuel situation was terrible. Their primary base was Tan Son Nhut, which was being shelled. So I can emphasize the heroism of these pilots.”

But the fuel situation at Tan Son Nhut airport was even worse than that. Air America’s Boyd Mesecher, who upon arrival – together with others – had assisted the Air America pilots with their arrivals and departures at the DAO tennis court pads, was faced with a total lack of aviation fuel at the DAO compound, as he remembers: “AAM captain Filippi told me that we needed to obtain JP-4 fuel for the helicopters and he asked me where was the DAO fuel truck. I explained that I knew DAO USAF Major Cook had an ESSO JP-4 fuel truck as part of the DAO ECC planning but I was not involved in their (DAO) planning. Not knowing where the DAO fuel truck was positioned, Dick Wengenroth and myself took a DAO truck and hotwired the ignition and proceeded to drive around the DAO building 5000 compound, but was unable to find the JP-4 truck. Then I asked Captain Filippi to obtain a few U.S. Marines from ECC

119 Boyd D. Mesecher, “Statement about the Saigon evacuation of the Air America Inc. (AAM) employees”, sent to Al Wueste, President Air Asia Co Ltd on 13 August 75, p.5, in: UTD/CIA/B17F5.
121 Frank Snepp, in: The Fall of Saigon, video tape, Discovery Channel 1995, at 33 minutes, 57 seconds.
and we could go to the AAM ramp and bring out some of the 225 drums of JP-4 we had there. Capt. Filippi could apparently get no U.S. Marines designated for this assignment. So I went and got one of the AAM pilots to fly over the DAO area, with Dick Wengenroth and myself searching for the JP-4 truck. We spotted it at the lot around the corner of the BX stop and shop building. We returned to the ECC and attempted to locate the JP-4 truck ignition keys. No one knew where the keys were, so we flew to the BX LZ pads and walked to the lot where the JP-4 truck was parked. The lot gate had a padlock on it which we broke off. Within about 20 minutes we had hotwired the JP-4 truck ignition wires, but the truck battery was so weak, the engine would not start. We considered towing the JP-4 truck using a nearby tow truck, but as the JP-4 truck was a hydromatic, if we could not start the JP-4 truck engine, then we would not be able to pump the JP-4 from the truck. We then returned to DAO ECC by AAM helicopter. We could not find any DAO vehicles with a large enough battery to suit the JP-4 truck needs. So again we flew to the BX LZ pads with the thought of taking the battery from a nearby ISUZU bus and use it for the JP-4 truck. This time Stan Huster accompanied Dick Wengenroth and myself. We switched the batteries, only to find out the bus battery was dead. We then went back to DAO ECC and again requested Capt. Filippi to provide us with a few U.S. Marines so that we could obtain JP-4 fuel drums or the standby ESSO JP-4 truck from the AAM compound. As we again could not get any U.S. Marines, for security we elected not to re-enter the abandoned AAM compound for fuel. Later while listening to the AAM helicopter pilots talking to the AAM OM [Operations Manager] at DAO by radio, it was readily evident that our pilots were carefully monitoring their fuel onboard and programming their roof top pickups of people, to enable refueling at the U.S. ships off Vung Tau, where the majority of their passengers were being taken. The AAM helicopter pilots did a great job in fuel management as well as some ‘CAN DO’ flying.”

Reception at the fleet

Even US military sources admit that Air America had been forced to alter their operational procedures without always being welcomed on the ships: “Aircraft upon running low on fuel, instead of landing at TSN would seek out one of the Naval vessels to unload passengers and take on fuel. Reception at the vessels varied from providing the fuel to refusal to provide fuel with a threat to push the aircraft overboard and process the crew as refugees.” This was especially the case before noon, when the crews of the US ships had not yet understood that Air America helicopters were a vital part of the evacuation and that their only chance to get fuel was on the ships. One of the first victims of unfriendly treatment by US Navy crews was David B. Kendall who reached the Blue Ridge shortly before noon. From the first moment, his helicopter, Bell 205 N47000, had had several problems: It had no main generator, no working radios, but had oil running down both front windshields. As his instruments had been in the green, Kendall made several pickups of Air America personnel until he was told to load up with passengers at the DAO and fly to the Blue Ridge to refuel and have light maintenance done. “When he landed with refugees at the USS Blue Ridge the ship’s crew took one look and ordered him to ditch the aircraft. The recommended procedure is to land in the water and turn the helicopter on its side while the blades are still turning. Dave decided to do it different and he trimmed the aircraft nose down about 20 feet above the water and jumped out. You

can watch him do it on ABC’s presentation *Last Chopper Out*.125 When he jumped out, the aircraft center of gravity changed and the blades almost hit him. They scooped him out of the water and sent him below where he changed shirts, but kept his overalls.”126 A little bit later, Air America helicopter pilot Larry Stadulis arrived at the *USS Blue Ridge* in UH-1H 71-20139.127 He “was told to stand down at the ship and went below. A short time later he was told he was needed to go back and fly an unattended helicopter. By this time, the *Blue Ridge* was able to sort out who the rogue helicopters fleeing Saigon were and that Air America was carrying refugees. Dave saw that Larry was going back and he climbed in with him. They shuttled back and forth the rest of the day.”128

Air America’s Bell 205 N47000 ditching into the sea near the *USS Blue Ridge* on 29 April 75 (photos by Dave Routson, with kind permission from the Air America Association)

The next victims of unfriendly treatment by US Navy crews were Donald R. Buxter and Dennis C. Eisler, who arrived at the *USS Blue Ridge* shortly after Dave Kendall, transporting 10 passengers in their Bell 204B N8535F. As the sky was full of VNAF helicopters, they were allowed to land only after 30 minutes of orbiting. When they refused to ditch the aircraft into the sea, as they were ordered, the helicopter’s doors were removed, and the 2 Air America pilots were firmly escorted off the deck and confined below. Only the following day they discovered that their helicopter was still sitting on the deck, impounded by the US Navy.129 Air America’s Marius Burke heavily criticizes this type of ‘welcome’: “It is unclear

125 The scene can also be seen on the video tape *The Fall of Saigon*, Discovery Channel 1995, at 56 minutes, 30 seconds, and in Monte Markham’s documentary *The CIA’s Secret Airline* (2000) at 0.42.10 minutes.
127 List of Air America helicopter crews that flew on 29 April 75, kindly e-mailed to the author by Prof. Bill Leary on 17 October 2004.
129 List of Air America helicopter crews that flew on 29 April 75, kindly e-mailed to the author by Prof. Bill Leary on 17 October 2004; Leary/Czajkowski, “Air America: played a crucial part of the emergency helicopter evacuation of Saigon”, p.8, at: http://historynet.com/wars_conflicts/vietnam_war/3035911.html. The trip report written by Donald R. Buxter and Dennis C. Eisler can be read online on the CIA website at http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/15/c05273129.pdf. Here are some extracts: “Capt. Eisler and I manned N8535F at about 0930 hours. […] We then landed on rooftop pad no. 30, 192 Cong Ly Street. […] We took off from pad 30 with 10 passengers aboard. […] At this point we had about 700 pounds of fuel remaining so we decided to proceed to one of the ships, drop off our passengers, refuel and return to Saigon to assist in the evacuation of personnel from the rooftop pads to the DAO. We contacted the U.S.S. Blue
if the various ships were aware of our actual mission. On the Blue Ridge, Cmdr. Christiansen obviously did not appreciate our key role. He forced Capt. Kendall to ditch his ship and it was subsequently discovered that 35F was asked to ditch after making just one trip to the ship. After removing the doors the XO changed his mind and secured the aircraft forward. It was not utilized for the rest of the operation, although nothing was wrong with it. And this was at a time when Air America was the only evacuation capability in operation. How such a misunderstanding could have occurred, particularly aboard the command ship, is hard to fathom.”

At about noon on 29 April 75, Thomas P. Grady who had landed his UH-1H 66-16162 at a DAO pad near the airfield after shuttling Air America personnel from downtown rooftops to the airport, flew to the Blue Ridge. He recalls: “When I got there an Air Force officer, U.S. type, asked me to take some important papers (800 lbs. worth) out to the USS Blue Ridge. I check with my boss, he said ok, so I left with 800 lbs. and five Americans. When I arrived at the Blue Ridge there were 5 or 6 VNAF helicopters and one AAM ICCS helicopter circling the ship. I couldn’t talk to anyone, my radios were bad. I couldn’t wait for all these guys to land; I was getting low on gas and had to get back to Saigon. So I just pulled up and hovered off the back of the ship (it was moving) until the chopper on the deck took off than I landed. (The pad is just big enough for one helicopter at a time.) I dropped my passengers and cargo and asked if they could fix my radios and if they had any gas. They could not fix my radios but could give me gas. All the VNAF choppers that landed on the ship were told to ditch their aircraft after the passengers got off. Then they’d pick up the pilot in a small boat. They didn’t realize the ICCS chopper was an American aircraft or they would not have had him ditch. The ICCS chopper was being flown by a VNAF pilot who stole the aircraft off our other ramp. […] While my flight mechanic was refueling the aircraft I saw what I thought was an explosion up at the right forward side of the ship. A few seconds later I felt a hard jolt in my helicopter. Immediately I looked at my instruments, about all my caution lights were on, so I shut the aircraft down. I had no idea what had happened, I looked at the fire fighting crew and they were just standing ready, so I was pretty sure I wasn’t on fire. I got out to take a look and saw my engine oil just pouring out of the engine compartment all over the deck and a helicopter tail rotor sticking out of my engine like a knife blade. I picked up our bags and brought them up away from the aircraft, just in case she decided to burn. As I headed back to the cockpit to get the rest of my stuff I noticed a VNAF chopper very close trying to land next to me. There wasn’t enough room for the two of us but he was going to land anyway. So I grabbed my stuff and got away from the aircraft. My rotor-blades were still turning, slowing down but still turning pretty fast. He landed anyway and locked rotor blades with my aircraft, which almost knocked his chopper over board. While it was just hanging on the rear of the

Ridge, advised them of our intentions and their controller vectored us to the ship. Upon arrival we had to orbit for about 30 minutes waiting for landing clearance. On at least four occasions we advised the Blue Ridge that we would require refueling and the controller acknowledged each time so we were certain we would be getting fuel, however, immediately upon landing the Executive Officer of the Blue Ridge rushed up and shouted words to the effect that we could not have any fuel and that we should fly the aircraft over the side and ditch it in the ocean. At the same time, Navy personnel were removing the cockpit doors and throwing them over the side. I told the Executive Officer that we must return to Saigon but he said that we were no longer needed and that the military were on the way to Saigon to complete the evacuation. At this point I signaled to Capt. Eisler and he shut down the engine and we dismounted. I told the Executive Officer that if he wanted our aircraft off his ship, he could push it over the side, that neither Capt. Eisler nor I were going to ditch it. He then motioned to two sailors and I was firmly escorted off the flight deck. I and my luggage were searched, my personal weapon thrown overboard and I was taken below deck again until the following morning when I discovered N8535F sitting there forward of the flight deck with no cockpit doors. In effect our aircraft was impounded by the U.S. Navy on the U.S.S. Blue Ridge at about 1200 hours, 29 April 1975, preventing us from completing our assigned mission.”

130 Burke, “Evacuation comments and observations”, at: UTD/LaShomb/B8F4.
VNAF UH-1H “959” being thrown overboard the USS Hancock on 29 April 1975 (with kind permission from the photographer, former Air America pilot Tony Coalson)

ship, all the people jumped out then the crew of the ship pushed it over board. They took my aircraft and pushed it up on deck and saved it. [...] What hit me were pieces of the ICCS helicopter when it hit the right forward side of the ship more than 500 feet away when the VNAF pilot was trying to ditch it. He was told to ditch off the aft left side of the ship, but couldn’t quite make up his mind to ditch. He kept getting near the water and changing his mind and finally worked his way around the front to the right front side. Then he just jumped out of the helicopter about 40 feet from the water, and the helicopter turned in and hit the side of the ship before it hit the water. It hit below the main deck which was luck and the tail rotor flew more than 500 feet to stick in my engine about one foot above my flight mechanics head.”

The stolen ICCS UH-1H that crashed into the USS Blue Ridge was 69-16715.

But not all Air America helicopters that landed on the USS Blue Ridge made a similar experience. Air America Captain J. D. Fonburg flew Bell 204B N1307X during the whole day, and in the morning, he “made 4 or 5 trips from building 259 to Air America ramp with flight crews plus Mr. Velte, Mr. Green, Reid and ground maintenance people. Approximately 50 people were transported by 07X until OM [= Operations Manager] directed all aircraft to standby on a rooftop until further notice due to VNAF theft of our aircraft plus ramp congestion by Vietnamese.”

He went to the Embassy rooftop, but was then called to the tennis courts for a load. J. D. Fonburg recalls: “Ed Reid loaded me for the Blue Ridge. I arrived at the Blue Ridge, offloaded, refueled and went back to Saigon whereupon I landed at the Embassy roof and picked up another load heading for the Blue Ridge. Arriving at Blue Ridge, it had a full deck, so I was landed on a ship called Fireball. I returned to Saigon after refueling on Fireball and picked up another Embassy roof load, this time going to the Fireball again and refueled. Returning to Saigon, I was directed to the H30 pad where I loaded and

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dropped this group on the *Denver* and refueled and went back to Saigon, making one more pickup at the H30 pad. I proceeded to the *U.S.S. Duluth*, where I landed and secured at about 1900 hours local time. I estimate 50 (flight crews and ground crews) transferred from 259-AAM ramp in the morning and the Saigon to ship movement at 75-80 passengers.”

### Afternoon flights

In the early afternoon, the Marine helicopters were still nowhere in sight, but Air America’s CEO Paul Velte decided to continue shuttling evacuees from Saigon rooftop landing pads to the DAO from where they would be flown to the ships by the Marine helicopters later in the afternoon. “When pilots reached 700 to 1,000 pounds of fuel remaining, they flew the evacuees directly to the ships, refueled, and returned to Saigon.”

In spite of the dramatic character of the overall situation, most of the shuttles themselves were probably more or less uneventful, although some flights were more adventurous than others. This was particularly true for the experience made by 55 years old Air America pilot Chauncey J. Collard, who in the morning, when Air America pilots were grabbing Company helicopters before VNAF pilots could steal them, had ended up with UH-1H 70-15866. This aircraft was notoriously tail heavy and would shake violently at speeds over 90 knots, as Collard knew from his fruitless attempts to correct its center of gravity problem some weeks before. After a few trips from downtown Saigon to the DAO the he had to refuel at the fleet and chose to land on the *USS Blue Ridge*. “As soon as he landed, the ship’s crew removed his doors and ordered him to take off and ditch. Ditching at sea is actually an emergency maneuver and dangerous. It didn’t seem like a good idea to Chauncey and he headed back to Saigon for another load after refueling at a ship that was more lenient. He told me years later that he remembered it being a little breezy flying the rest of the day without doors. For several people, who remembered how he saved them, the decision was a godsend, but it nearly cost him his life.

Chauncey was returning to Saigon on one leg and noticed a group of Americans frantically waving from a roof. The landing area was tight with trees very closely situated in the only spot available. Very carefully, he was able to thread his way through the trees to pick them up. The procedure is much easier with a flight mechanic to provide another set of eyes, but he was flying alone. The Americans told him that North Vietnamese troops were close by and they should hurry. Chauncey had moved the copilot seat as far forward as possible to prevent people mobbing the aircraft from getting in the cockpit. One of the Americans weighed about 300 pounds and was going to sit up front regardless of what Chauncey said. He was able to wedge himself in the seat but there was no room for Chauncey to move the flight controls. Finally, Chauncey could see the man was not going to get in back and he motioned him to pull the lever that would allow the seat to slide rearward. Instead of the seat release, the passenger grabbed the collective lever, which moves the helicopter up and down. He pulled straight up and Chauncey found he was shooting thru the trees he so carefully avoided when landing! Chauncey was screaming at him to turn loose and was practically standing on the control stick trying to push it down. They were going to crash! There wasn’t anything Chauncey could do to prevent it. Finally, the fat man realized what he was doing and released the controls. Chauncey was able to prevent a needless accident and fly them to safety.”

“Collard flew to the Embassy rooftop, about two blocks away. After landing, ‘I had to wrestle with the S.O.B. again, while he tried climbing out of the seat’. He finally made it. He also

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managed to take with him Collard’s briefcase, containing his passport and other important documents. Fortunately, another pilot spotted the briefcase as it lay on the roof and returned it to Collard later in the day.”

At about 3.15 p.m. the big military helicopters arrived at the DAO. A total of 28 Boeing-Vertol CH-46s and 40 Sikorsky CH-53 Sea Stallions of the US Marines, as well as 12 Sikorsky HH-53Cs of the US Air Force flew the evacuees to the 40 ships of the U.S. fleet lying before the coast of South Vietnam. The original plan had been to pick up most evacuees at the DAO compound, and General Carey, commander of the USMC helicopters, had been told there would be only about 50 people to be picked up at the Embassy. But when news spread at about 1 p.m. that the airport had been closed, people considered the Embassy to be the primary pick up point.

Already before noon, CIA Station Chief Tom Polgar had ordered to cut down Ambassador Martin’s favorite tamarind tree on the Embassy compound, so that the military helicopters could land in the courtyard. At first, the bigger CH-53s landed only at the DAO, while the smaller Sea Knights landed in the U.S. Embassy courtyard. Later CH-53s also landed in the Embassy courtyard – even late at night, while the Sea Kings also landed on top of the Embassy’s roof – for example the one that

Saigon 21 April 75: an Air America Bell 205 on a rooftop landing pad

(UTD/Walton/B2F5, photo no. 1JW-2-5-PC003)

139 General Homer Smith, in: video tape The Fall of Saigon, Discovery Channel 1995, at 34 minutes, 40 seconds.
140 Clarence A. Robinson, Jr, Communists win vast air fleet, in: Aviation Week & Space Technology, 5 May 1975, pp.16-17.
141 The Fall of Saigon, video tape, Discovery Channel 1995, at 35 and 39 minutes, 20 seconds.
142 According to Harnage, A thousand faces, p.156, it was Defense Attaché General Homer Smith who ordered to cut down the tree so that the larger helicopters could begin their airlift.
144 See the video tape The Fall of Saigon, Discovery Channel 1995, at 57 minutes, 30 seconds, and 59 minutes, 30 seconds.
145 See the video tape The Fall of Saigon, Discovery Channel 1995, at 43, 43.35, 51.30 minutes, and 1 hour, 20 minutes.
146 See the video tape The Fall of Saigon, Discovery Channel 1995, at 45 and 67 minutes.
transported Ambassador Martin to the fleet. Air America’s Nikki A. Filippi had worked with the Marine Corps aviation representatives in developing a helicopter traffic control scheme to avoid conflict between the military and the civilian aircraft, and this plan worked well. “Nikki and Ed Reid […] maintained a communication post throughout the day. They had to move it twice due to enemy activity and finally evacuated to the USS Hancock that evening.” Air America helicopters continued their rooftop operation, since about 4 p.m. reinforced by the aircraft that had arrived from Can Tho in the meantime.

In better days: Air America UH-1H at Saigon in 1973
(Air America Log, vol. VII, no. 9, 1973, p.6)

One of the helicopter pilots arriving from Can Tho via Con Son Island in the afternoon was Captain Terry Olson in UH-1H “20110”. He reports: “The following pilots were working Saigon while I was there: 093 (Stergar and Genz), 081 (Vaughn), 14F (Taylor and Weiss), 105 (Hitchman and Gehring), 03X (Freedman), 06X (Coalson), 13F (Braithwaite), 12F (Burke and Carpenter), 139 (Stadulis and Kendall). This list is probably incomplete. Spent the entire time in Saigon shuttling people from rooftops to the DAO compound. I landed on the following pads several times: 259 Troung Quoc Dung (USAID building), 192 Cong Ly (USAID building), the USAID building on Le Van Duyet, BOQ#1 and Captain Goodwin’s compound. We had a constant problem getting Americans to board our helicopters. Most had no idea how urgent the situation was and were still loading Vietnamese passengers on us when they should have been getting out themselves. When my fuel got low I picked up 10 passengers at DAO and headed directly for the fleet. I shutdown on the flight deck of the U.S.S. Hancock at 1900L with 100 pounds of fuel remaining.”

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147 See the video tape The Fall of Saigon, Discovery Channel 1995, at 83 minutes.
Evacuation from the Pittman Building\textsuperscript{151}

The most famous evacuation flown by Air America on 29 April 75 was one from the Pittman Building at Saigon, although most people who saw the world famous photo taken by UPI photographer Hubert van Es probably thought that it was a US military helicopter on top of the US Embassy – it wasn’t. Originally, the Pittman Building had not been planned to serve

as a meeting point for such a massive evacuation. First, Saigon’s CIA Station Chief Tom Polgar had asked Oren B. Harnage, Deputy Chief of the Embassy’s Air Branch,\textsuperscript{152} to have “our friends”, that is Vietnamese spies and collaborators working for the U.S. Government,\textsuperscript{153} airlifted from atop the Lee Hotel at 6 Chien Si Circle to the DAO complex. But then it turned out that that pad wasn’t usable. Later Polgar told him that the location had been changed to 22 Gia Long, the Pittman Building, residence of the Assistant Chief of Station. Oren Harnage recalls: “Back to the Embassy rooftop and I commandeer the first Air America chopper to land and head for the Pittman building a few blocks away. […] The pad is atop the elevator shaft and barely wide enough for the skids of the chopper with no room for more than one person at a time, requiring the pilot to maintain power and stay in the lift mode. […] As many as fifteen people were aboard some flights, twice as many as normal, and I fly standing outside on the skids with one of the passengers holding onto my arm. I have no way to identify my passengers and it is first come first served, ladies with infants being an exception. Each short flight to Tan Son Nhut was made with anxiety while listening to and observing the firefight below with hope none of the fire is directed at my aircraft. I am not sure just how many flights I make on this fateful day of 29 April or how many people will be airlifted to safety, but I will make as many trips as fuel will permit. I utilized two helicopters releasing them only when fuel becomes a critical problem.”\textsuperscript{154} One of the 2 helicopters was an unidentified Bell 204B that can be seen on the video tape \textit{The Fall of Saigon}.\textsuperscript{155} The second helicopter has become world famous, because UPI photographer Hubert van Es took a dramatic shot of Harnage leaning down to help people up the ladder to the helicopter. The identity of this helicopter is difficult to read on that photo, and so there was some discussion about its identity. It was not until in 2000 that Bob Caron could prove that the helicopter on the photo was Bell 205 N47004 – the aircraft that Bob Caron had flown himself that day.\textsuperscript{156} In the meantime, there are no longer any doubts about its identity, because French photographer

\begin{itemize}
\item[151] See the video tape at \url{http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vJ_JmnJrOA0}.
\item[152] Harnage, \textit{A thousand faces}, p.80.
\item[153] Frank Snepp, in: \textit{The Fall of Saigon}, video tape, Discovery Channel 1995, at 34 minutes, 40 seconds.
\item[155] \textit{The Fall of Saigon}, video tape, Discovery Channel 1995, at 34 minutes, 12 seconds.
\end{itemize}
Philippe Buffon took a series of shots of the same scene, but from a much better angle, and on these photos, the registration N47004 is evident, as can be seen on one of those photos published at the beginning of this file. More photos taken by Philippe Buffon and depicting the same historic moment and the same aircraft can be seen on the photographer’s website located at http://philippe.buffon.free.fr/images/vietnamexpo/heloco/index.htm.

The Pittman Building on 15 March 2014, taken by the author

More photos of the Pittman Building – formerly 22 Gia Long Street, now 22 Lý Tự Trọng Street – and were taken by former Air America pilot Tony Coalson in 2013 during a visit to Saigon and kindly sent to the author on 14 March 2015:

Photo of the Pittman Building, Saigon, taken in 2013 by former Air America pilot Tony Coalson who kindly sent them to the author on 14 March 2015
Later in the afternoon, maybe between 5 p.m. and 6 p.m., one of the UH-1Hs that had arrived from Can Tho (V-17) at about 4 p.m., “20105” crewed by Capt. R.W. Hitchman as PIC and Captain Gehring as co-pilot, took over the flights from the Pittman building. After
leaving the Can Tho area, this helicopter first flew to Con Son Island (V-32) and evacuated John Ford and the LORAN people to the *USS Barbour County*.\textsuperscript{157} Arriving in the Saigon area, Hitchman and Gehring were instructed by the Operations Manager “to try to pick up some people at the ‘F’ pad.”\textsuperscript{158} When that proved to be impossible, “we then proceeded to 259 Truong Quoc Dung and lifted about 7 or 8 loads of people to the DAO pad. We made several pickups at the old USAID building just north of the 259 building and were instructed to go to the Embassy rooftop. There, ‘O.B.’ [= Oren B. Harnage] got aboard and directed us to the tiny rooftop downtown, where we picked up about 35 people. [The picture of the helicopter on the rooftop, with the man helping people at the top of the ladder, which appeared in the 12 May issues of *Time* and *Newsweek* may be us unless someone else landed on that pad with someone who looked like OB wearing a white shirt). We took these people to the Embassy rooftop. After the second lift, we were running low on fuel, so we took a load of people from the Embassy rooftop and headed for the sea.”\textsuperscript{159} Captain Hitchman, the pilot of UH-1H “20105” continues: “Upon arriving at V-05 [= Vung Tau]. I was directed to the *U.S.S. Blue Ridge*. After arriving at the *Blue Ridge* and seeing the state of confusion and how long it would be before we could land, I asked for a vector to another ship. After being vectored to the *U.S.S. Midway*, and landing safely and having flown 15 minutes on a 20-minuted fuel warning light and the time being after 1900L we shut down, and secured.”\textsuperscript{160}

**Late flights:**

At about 16.15 p.m., UH-1H N47004, one of the 2 Air America helicopters at the DAO at that moment proceeded to the *USS Vancouver*, taking with it some of the Company people still present at the DAO.\textsuperscript{161} At about 16.30 p.m. “VP SVND and about four other Americans remained at DAO with one standby AAM helicopter. The other sixteen or so AAM helicopters were still flying rooftop pickups in Saigon and taking their passengers to the U.S. ships, refueling and returning to Saigon for more rooftop pickups. I was later informed that our helicopters flew these rooftop missions until about 2000L that same night of 29 April 1975.”\textsuperscript{162} As to N47004, its last trip from Tan Son Nhat to the *USS Hancock* was made by Air America Capt. J. E. Hunter at about 18.45 hours local time.\textsuperscript{163}

Another Air America helicopter that flew until late at night was UH-1H 71-20139. From 1630 to 1830 hours local time, Capts. Lee Genz and Frank Stergar flew evacuation missions. As Capt. Stergar notes: “Cleared out HLZ [= Helicopter Landing Zone] 30 (192 Cong Ly) and USAID Annex.”\textsuperscript{164} When Stergar left the aircraft onboard the *USS Duluth* at 1830 hours attempting to recover his brief case, two other Air America pilots took over UH-1H 71-20139: Larry Stadulis and David Kendall.\textsuperscript{165} When sunset approached, Stadulis and Kendall were ordered to pick up a single American who remained on the USAID rooftop pad; it turned out to be Edward Twiford\textsuperscript{166} who had been part of the security force that had to keep order on the

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\textsuperscript{162} Boyd D. Mesecher, “Statement about the Saigon evacuation of the Air America Inc. (AAM) employees”, sent to Al Wueste, President Air Asia Co Ltd on 13 August 75, pp.4/5, in: UTD/CIA/B17F5.


\textsuperscript{165} List of Air America helicopter crews that flew on 29 April 75, kindly e-mailed to the author by Prof. Bill Leary on 17 October 2004.

\textsuperscript{166} Edward A. Twiford apparently worked at Air America’s Finance Office and passed the night from 28 to 29 April 75 on the rooftop of 8 Truong Quoc Dung, an evacuation point called “India Pad”. The following morning, “at approximately 1000/1030 we were lifted by helicopter, piloted by Captain Chauncey Collard, from India Pad to Pad 259. Here we set down and off loaded due to congestion at the DAO evacuation points. […] At this time I
“Stadulis and Kendall swept in and immediately executed a high hover while Ralph Begien, head of Air America’s Flight Information Center, reached down and brought Twiford into the helicopter. As the Huey lifted off, four Vietnamese grabbed the skids, while others opened fire on the helicopter. Risking his life, Begien, who was not wearing a seat belt, leaned far over the side and pulled in the four men.”

Or, as Allen Cates puts it: “Tragedies were as common as boards on a picket fence, but spontaneous heroics occurred as well. On one occasion, Ralph Begien ended up hanging out of the helicopter without a safety strap to enable a Vietnamese man to be pulled inside to safety. Unheralded and unknown, Ralph was performing acts of heroism for no other reason than it was the right thing to do.” For Larry Stadulis and David Kendall, this was not yet the end of their adventure, as Allen Cates notes: “By nightfall, they were mentally and physically exhausted. They were in the middle of the South China Sea in light rain trying to find the carrier Midway and they could not see any visible light outside the cockpit. The situation required the US Navy to create a black out and all light was extinguished. To make matters worse, the 20-minute low fuel light had been on for 15 minutes and no one actually knew how accurate the light was. They were in trouble. Ditching at sea is difficult at best during the day. At night... even if you survived the ditching, you would probably drown shortly thereafter. They were calling for help from the Midway. The ship’s radar could see them but they could not see the ship. The low fuel warning light kept getting brighter and brighter. Throughout the day, it was obvious that Air America’s key role in the evacuation was not clearly understood. Cooperation from those who were supposed to be informed was slim and none. The Navy came through at the end. The situation was critical. Larry told the Midway they could not be seen and they needed a light. It was time for the Midway to make up their mind about who was friend or foe and they needed to do it fast. With only a few minutes of fuel remaining the Midway relented and turned on every light. Larry said it looked like a Christmas tree and it was definitely a gift. They landed mid ship on fumes.”

One of Air America’s last missions into Saigon was flown by Marius Burke: “After refueling on the Cook we made what was apparently the last AAM flight to V01 [tan Son Nhat airport]. A run was made to all the DZs and with the exception of 259, all were deserted. At 259 there were thousands mobbing the helipad with Vietnamese calling on the radio for pickups, while on the same frequency (45.90) what was apparently PRG, were stating that they had the chopper in sight and would shoot it down if it attempted to land. Since there were no known Americans or TCNs at 259, and in view of the mob problems encountered by the last choppers attempting pickups, this DZ was bypassed. We landed at

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167 Robbins reports a similar story for another American who had organized the evacuation from a rooftop pad: Walt Martindale (Air America, pp.302/3).


171 That is at “259 Truong Quoc Dung” near Tan Son Nhat airport, a large US Government operated apartment building; see above.
DAO and departed with a load of Americans at about 1915 en route to the Blue Ridge. After being told what a good job AAM had done we were told to shut down. Upon exiting the helicopter we were frisked and all survival equipment was confiscated and thrown overboard. Communications ended at that time and we were treated as refugees and were unable to determine if our services could be utilized further.”

Results:

While former South Vietnamese President Thieu had already been flown out in a USAF transport late at night on 25 April 75, other prominent members of the South Vietnamese government remained until the very last moment: On 29 April 1975, Nguyen Cao Ky, former South Vietnamese premier and head of the VNAF, was flown to the carrier USS Midway (CVA-41) by Air America. This point contradicts what has sometimes been published. As Prof. Bill Leary wrote to the author: “All published accounts (Snepp, Bulter, Isaacs) say that Ky flew his ‘private helicopter’ to the Midway on April 29. Message traffic at the U.S. Naval Archives suggests a different story: ‘CFT 76 - 1300H (Local time): Air America helo evacuated Air Vice Marshall Ky and Mrs. Martin to the Denver.’ Phil Vaughn flew Mrs. Martin ‘and a party of 12’ to the Denver, arriving at 1230 hours. I would be inclined to go with the contemporary documentation unless there is compelling evidence to the contrary.” Interestingly, among the Air America helicopters that were offloaded at Corpus Christi, Texas in 1975 on their way to new customers, there was apparently also a Bell UH-1H that had a South Vietnamese Government registration: XV-GCU (msn 10295, ex US Army 68-15365): It was reported to have been seen in Air America colors at Corpus Christi, TX, in October 75 but a photo taken on the USS Midway clearly shows that it had South Vietnamese Air Force insignia, but – contrary to other SVNAF UH-1H helicopters also had a civil registration on the tail. As this aircraft was not part of Air America’s UH-1H fleet, it is believed that XV-GCU was the helicopter in which Air Vice Marshall Ky was officially said to be evacuated to the US fleet, although in reality he used Air America’s UH-1H “20081” – a measure that was possibly destined to protect him from being shot down. XV-GCU was later returned to the US Army as 68-15365.

As to the airlift from the Pittman Building, Oren B. Harnage assures that “the airlift designed to evacuate specific persons was, at least, partially successful. I know the Minister of Defense Tran Van Don and family, B/Gen Minh and family, Chief of Communications and Intelligence, the Deputy Chief of Police Special Branch, Mrs. Trung wife of General Trung Director of Psychological Warfare, Mr. Anh Chief of Protocol and family, and a Lt. Col. who played a vital role in protecting access to the Embassy were airlifted to Tan Son Nhut airport, plus nameless others.” Harnage himself was taken to the USS Denver in one of the USMC CH-46s that landed on top of the US Embassy. At the end, during this dramatic evacuation of Saigon, more than 7,000 refugees – 1,373 Americans, 5,595 South Vietnamese, and 85 third-country nationals – were airlifted to the 40 ships of the U.S. fleet lying before the

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172 Burke, “Evacuation comments and observations”, p.9, at: UTD/LaShomb/B8F4.
173 Harnage, A thousand faces, p.151.
174 Dorr / Bishop, Vietnam Air War Debrief, p.222.
175 E-mail dated 24 October 2004 kindly sent to the author by Prof. Bill Leary.
177 See http://www.cv41.org/photos/gallery/main.php?g2_itemId=18480.
178 See, for example, the video tape The Fall of Saigon, video tape, Discovery Channel 1995, at 55 minutes.
179 Harnage, A thousand faces, p.159.
180 Harnage, A thousand faces, p.162.
181 Robbins, Air America, p.304.
coast of South Vietnam.\textsuperscript{182} Of course, most of these refugees were taken to the ships by the big military helicopters, that is by 28 CH-46s and 40 CH-53 of the U.S. Marines, and the 12 Sikorsky HH-53Cs belonging to the U.S. Air Force.\textsuperscript{183} But with its small fleet of small helicopters – with 6 aircraft stolen by VNAF pilots\textsuperscript{184} and 2 more not flyable,\textsuperscript{185} only 10 Bell UH-1Hs,\textsuperscript{186} 2 Bell 205s,\textsuperscript{187} and 8 Bell 204Bs\textsuperscript{188} participated in the evacuation, and this number was further reduced by those 3 helicopters that were impounded, ditched, or damaged at the ships\textsuperscript{189} – Air America’s crews did a tremendous job in hauling more than 1,000 passengers to the Embassy, the DAO, or to the ships.\textsuperscript{190}

![A CH-46 and a CH-53 of the U.S. Marines aboard the USS Hancock on 29 and 30 April 75](with kind permission from the photographer, former Air America pilot Tony Coalson)

\textsuperscript{182}At the end, 50 Air America employees – the CEO and other officers, several pilots and ground personnel – were evacuated on the ships (see XOXO of 2 May 75, online readable on the CIA website at: http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/15/c05280377.pdf).

\textsuperscript{183}Clarence A. Robinson, Jr, Communists win vast air fleet, in: Aviation Week & Space Technology, 5 May 1975, pp.16-17.

\textsuperscript{184}UH-1Hs 69-16715, 70-15738, 70-15843, 70-15916, and 71-20186 plus Bell 204B N1305X (for details see the aircraft files of this database).

\textsuperscript{185}UH-1H 70-15856 was badly damaged by an NVA rocket and had to be left on the ramp; Bell 205 N47001 was not flyable due to an engine change and had to be abandoned (for details see the aircraft files of this database).

\textsuperscript{186}The crews who flew the aircraft are given in brackets: 66-16162 (Grady), 70-15866 (Collard, Hunter), 71-20081 (Vaughn), 71-20093 (Genz), 71-20103 (Stergar, Reid, Kendall, Filippi), 71-20104 (Cash, Wood), 71-20105 (Hitchman, Gehring), 71-20110 (Taylor, Weiss, Olson, Goodwin), 71-20115 (Gartz), and 71-20139 (Stadulis, Kendall, Stergar); the names of the crews were kindly sent the author by Prof. Bill Leary in his e-mail dated 17 October 2004.

\textsuperscript{187}The crews who flew the aircraft are given in brackets: N47000 (Kendall), N47004 (Caron, Stergar, Hunter); the names of the crews were kindly sent the author by Prof. Bill Leary in his e-mail dated 17 October 2004.

\textsuperscript{188}The crews who flew the aircraft are given in brackets: N13003X (Freedman), N1304X (Lannin), N1306X (Coalson, Carpenter, Vaughan), N1307X (Fonburg), N8512F (Burke, Carpenter), N8513F (Braithwaite, Spencer), N8514F (Olson, Goodwin, Taylor, Weiss), and N8535F (Buxton, Eisler); the names of the crews were kindly sent the author by Prof. Bill Leary in his e-mail dated 17 October 2004.

\textsuperscript{189}N8535F was impounded on the Blue Ridge, N47000 was ditched alongside the same ship, and 66-16162 was damaged on deck of the Blue Ridge; for details see above.

\textsuperscript{190}Robbins, Air America, p.305;
Yet, while the U.S. Marines received several honors for flying the evacuees to safety, Air America’s vital contribution to the evacuation of Saigon was seldom acknowledged. On 5 May 75, CIA Director William Colby sent a telex to Air America’s CEO Paul Velte, saying: “The withdrawal from Vietnam draws to a conclusion Air America’s operational activities […]. Air America, appropriately named, has served its country well.” 191 On 11 May 75, Air America’s Chief Executive Officer Paul C. Velte Jr. thanked the employees of Air America who had participated in the evacuation from South Vietnam for “an outstandingly successful accomplishment of that mission”, 192 sending out 2 letters, one addressed to “The Company’s personnel, both ground staff and pilots,”, and another one to “our flight crew members”. 193 “The Company’s personnel, both ground staff and pilots, performing as a team accomplished the mission in a truly outstanding and professional manner. Your personal participation in this mission contributed to its overall success and on behalf of the Board of Directors and our customers I wish to convey to you our appreciation for a job well done in the finest humanitarian traditions.” 194

193 Both letters of 11 May 75 by Air America’s CEO Paul C. Velte Jr. can be read online at: http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/1818029/197580.pdf.
194 Both letters of 11 May 75 by Air America’s CEO Paul C. Velte Jr. can be read online at: http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/1818029/197580.pdf.
Paul C. Velte’s “Thank you, well done” to Air America’s South Vietnam personnel

But as the CIA denied its ownership of Air America for many years, none of those courageous Air America pilots ever heard about this modest accolade coming from William Colby – and what was even worse: Most people who saw the famous picture of Air America’s Bell 205 N47004 on top of the Pittman Building probably thought that it was an Air Force helicopter on top of the US Embassy. It wasn’t. Air America’s heroic crews really deserve better, for Air America’s role in the evacuation of Saigon was an accomplishment of daring and courage that saved the lives of many people who, without Air America, would probably have been trapped somewhere in Saigon. In the meantime, the names of the Air America personnel who were employed on the last day of the Vietnam War on 29 April 1975 are known, thanks to the efforts of Jesse Walton. They are:

A) MANAGEMENT AND GROUND SUPPORT
1. Paul Velte, AAM CEO
2. Helen Wight
3. Var Green
4. Al Brau
5. John Altamira
6. F.R. Andrews
7. Stan Huster
8. Paul C. Simpson
9. Ralph N. Begien
10. Harvey J. Kohler
11. Boyd Mesecher
12. K.M. Kempton
13. David M. Toliver
14. Reed Chase
15. Paul J. Disciullo
16. R.C. Liechty
17. George J. Keller
18. R.E. Fisher
19. Charles W. Myers
20. Mr. Bo
21. John Ford
22. Dick Wengenroth
23. Emerito Angeles
24. Victor M. Ballesteros
25. Francisco G. Vizcarra
26. Juan C. Dimandel
27. Henry B. Aludino
28. Jose DeJesus
29. Ramon B. Bautista
30. J.M. Mamuvac
31. Henry Bogdan
32. Prajoub Nutchai
33. K. H. Hempton

Both letters of 11 May 75 by Air America’s CEO Paul C. Velte Jr. can be read online at: http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/1818029/197580.pdf.
B) FLIGHT CREW

1. Fred F. Walker
2. S.A. Smith
3. Z. Radolinski
4. Art Kenyon
5. K.D. Nolan
6. Cal J. Bartlett
7. Art D. Wilson
8. E.W. Guthrie
9. H.L. Hines
10. E.G. Adams
11. Paul M. Severson
12. J.F. Voyles
13. Jim Roberts
14. Bill Shaver
15. Samuel T. Jordan
16. Marius Burke
17. F.E. Stergur
18. C.J. Collard
19. Edward S. Spenser
20. Kenneth Wood
21. Palmer C. Simpson
22. William H. Huff
23. Herman W. Gehring
24. William J. Gartz
25. F.W. Stikkel
26. Harvey J. Kohler
27. A.J. Rischman
28. T.R. Fraser
29. Warren Olson
30. Joseph Weiss
31. Richard M. Kaleta
32. David B. Kendall
33. Wayne C. Lannin
34. Tony M. Coalson
35. C.A. Folck
36. Terry Olson
37. Richard E. Stuart, Jr.
38. Melvin D. Cooper
39. Ronald C. Goodwin
40. Donald R. Burton
41. Bert W. Foote
42. George Taylor
43. Jack Hunter
44. Michael R. Braithwaite
45. T.R. Cash
46. Victor Carpenter
47. Paul J. Disciullo
48. R.C. Liechty
49. George J. Keller
50. Bob Hitchman
51. Charles W. Myers
52. Rex Young
53. Berl King
54. F.R. Andrews
55. Thomas C. Sailer
56. R. Caron
57. K.F. Herrington
58. Larry Stadulis
59. Donald E. Bussart
60. Nikki Fillipi

4) Leaving South East Asia

South Vietnam operations were to be phased out by 30 June 75, but the Company had to cease all operations on 29 April 75 with the evacuation of Saigon. When plans for a new staybehind company in Thailand fell thru, all Air America personnel were discharged. Air America was officially phased out on 30 June 76, returning over $20 million to the US Treasury. Only 5 or 6 years earlier, probably in the first half of 1970, Air America’s Managing Director George A. Doole could still say: “In the flying machine business you can hardly compare a single-engined STOL aircraft to a today’s modern four-engined jet transport. However if you do count noses, Air America’s fleet is slightly larger than that of Pan American, and Pan American’s is the fifth-largest fleet in the world. Air America is operating some 15 different types of aircraft.” So did Air America really have to evacuate such a big fleet when it left South Vietnam?

Aircraft sold and aircraft abandoned in South Vietnam

No, Air America didn’t. There were some types of aircraft that Air America had never operated in South Vietnam and that had already been phased out before April 75 – for example the C-130s, the UH-34Ds, the T-28s or the PBYs. Aircraft that had been bailed from the military were either returned (like the C-130Es) or transferred to other users (like the C-123Ks, which were given to the Royal Lao Air Force), when operations in Laos were closed down. Other types of aircraft had been sold, when they were no longer needed, like the PBYs and the Hughes 500s. Generally speaking, the number of aircraft operated by Air America began to go down in late 1970: When the Booklift flights to Korea were discontinued on 30

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197 Minutes of the Executive Committee of Air America Inc. of 19 March 75, in: UTD/CIA/B10F3.
199 *Flying Men, Flying Machines*, at 0 minutes, 07 to 40 seconds.
200 For details see the aircraft files of this database.
June 70,201 this was also the beginning of the end of Air America’s fleet of DC-6s and C-54s. In March 75, only DC-6 N90782 and C-54s N12190 and B-1016 remained, but N90782 was sold to Pacific Alaska Airlines on 7 April 75,202 and N12190 went to Air Vietnam on 2 April 75,203 so that at the end only C-54 B-1016 was left. During the final weeks of operation in South Vietnam, this aircraft “was utilized to send many boxes of administrative records to Hong Kong. In addition, we shipped about 9 TPE-331-25 (PC-6) engines, about 7 Porter propellers, 1 T53-13B (205A) engine, 1 TPE-331-47 (VTB) engine and 1 R1830 (C-47) engine to Tainan, on board B-1016.”204 On 10 July 75, it was sold to Bird & Sons.205

Air America’s fleet of C-46s was first reduced in 1971, when the last three of the aircraft leased from the CAA of Taiwan (B-138, B-146, and B-154) were put into inactive storage at Tainan. They were joined by N1383N, N9458Z, XW-PEJ, and XW-PGD in July 71, after the Company had lost its contract to drop rice in Laos.206 More C-46s joined them in 1972. Although 2 C-46s later returned to active service, most of the C-46s stored at Tainan were scrapped in 1974 so that in March 75, only 4 C-46s were still operated by Air America: N1383N, N9458Z, N67984, and N67985.207 But only 3 of them participated in the evacuation: N1383N had been depositioned Saigon-Tainan on 17 January 75208 and so was already based at Tainan in March 75,209 and this C-46 was stopped at Hong Kong on 29 April: “On Sunday 27 April, the situation further deteriorated and the NVA and VC forces approached the outskirts of Saigon. Air Am, under its contingency plan commenced its own evacuation and dispatched one C-46 aircraft to Taiwan loaded with some equipment and all non-essential third country nationals. After unloading, the same aircraft departed Taiwan on Monday, 28 April, for Saigon to evacuate all records. Subject aircraft arrived in Hong Kong enroute to Saigon but was unable to depart Hong Kong due to a flight restriction imposed on all non-scheduled aircraft from 1200-1800 hours. [...] Accordingly a departure for Saigon was scheduled for the morning of 29 April. However, during the evening of 28 April, the Communist forces launched a mortar and rocket attack on Saigon and TSN, which continued on through Tuesday, 29 April. This attack caused considerable damage to the air field. [...] The air field was littered with fatalities, destroyed/damaged vehicles and aircraft. [...] The control tower had been abandoned leaving the air field uncontrolled. Landing of any fixed wing aircraft under these conditions is considered impossible. Accordingly, AAI dispatched a message to Taiwan ordering the C-46 evacuation aircraft to remain in Hong Kong.210 At least one C-46 escaped to Thailand on 29 April,211 in early June, all four of them were at Tainan,212 but on 18 June 75, N1383N and N9458Z were sold in the Philippines.213

Air America’s fleet of C-47s had also been reduced over the years: In 1974, the last 2 C-47s owned by Air America, B-933 and B-879, were sold to Continental Air Services and China Airlines respectively, so that in March 75, only 5 C-47s bailed from the USAF...

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206 Flight Operations Circular no. DFOD-C-71-014 of 1 July 71, in: UTD/Hickler/B8F7B.
207 These aircraft were at Tainan in June 75 (Air America, owned aircraft as of 30 Sept.75, in: UTD/CIA/B56F1).
212 Air America, Owned aircraft, as of 30 Sept.75, in: UTD/CIA/B56F1.
remained at Saigon: “083”, “084”, “147”, “559”, and “994”, of which “083” and “084” had to be reactivated from inactive storage at the very last moment. Their flight to safety is well documented: “147”, “559”, and “994”215 landed at Bangkok, “084” crash-landed at U Tapao, and C-47 “083” landed at Tainan.216 “083”, “147”, “559”, and “994” returned to the USAF, and at least “147”, “559”, and “994” were later transferred to the Royal Thai Air Force.217

The situation of Air America’s Caribous is more complex. When operations in Laos were phased out in mid-May 74,218 all bailed Caribous were returned to the USAF. At that time, one of the 2 original DHC-4s, B-853, had already been sold after many years of service with the USAF. Caribous N539Y and N544Y had served in South Vietnam most of the time, but were put into inactive storage at Saigon in May 74.219 Both aircraft were to be sold to Masin Aircraft of Cologne in December 74, but the deal fell thru.220 They were still at Saigon in

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214 C-47 “083” had been put into inactive storage in July 72, “084” even in June 70; see Flight Operations Circular no. DOC-C-74-005 of 1 May 74, in: UTD/Hickler/B8F7C.

215 Capt. A. J. Rischman reports his trip from Saigon to Bangkok in C-47 “994” as follows: “The aircraft was loaded with Air America personnel, a total of 26, and I departed the ramp at approximately 0310Z. Takeoff was approximately 0315Z. The first phase of flight was normal and I proceeded southeastwards to implement my ‘canned’ flight plan for Brunei. However, the aircraft was short of fuel for this flight. […] I therefore changed to my ‘alternate’ plan and proceeded to Utapao in Thailand. This course of action was influenced by the conditions at Con Son Island, which prohibited use of this field for refueling. […] The flight was normal and a clearance was obtained for Utapao, where we landed at 0803. […] The aircraft was refueled and at 1322Z we departed for Bangkok, arriving at 1405Z” (Capt. A.J. Rischman’s trip report is online readable on the CIA website at: http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/15/c05273088.pdf).

216 See the letters dated 10 October 75, sent by Air America’s Senior Vice President Clyde S. Carter to USAID and to the USAF (in: UTD/CIA/B17F4).


218 See the files Air America in Laos of this database and the telex of 3 June 74 in: UTD/CIA/B31F10.

219 See the letters dated 10 October 75, sent by Air America’s Senior Vice President Clyde S. Carter to USAID and to the USAF (in: UTD/CIA/B17F4).

March 75, but left for Tainan on 6 April 75,\footnote{N539Y was flown by Messrs. Voyles and Foote, N544Y by Messrs. Jordan and Fraser for Saigon-Hong Kong-Tainan (Saigon Daily Flight Schedule for 6 April 75, in: UTD/Walker/B31F6).} where they were still in June 75.\footnote{Telex dated 20 March 75, in: UTD/CIA/B18F2; Aircraft list of 12 June 75, in: UTD/CIA/B51F12.} Their subsequent history can be seen in the aircraft files of this database. The most interesting case of all is that of B-851, Air America’s first Caribou: After many years of service as the Udorn-based aircraft for special operations in Laos, it was transferred to Saigon and reregistered as N11014 in the spring of 1971. At least in 1975, one of its main functions had become to transport fuel drums for helicopter operations.\footnote{Telex dated 28 March 75 from VPSVND to CEO, in: UTD/CIA/B18F2; Aircraft list of 12 June 75, in: UTD/CIA/B51F12.} In April 75, the aircraft was involved in transporting “aircraft parts and ground property sent to V01 Alternate (Con Son Island)”. What happened to Caribou N11014 can be found in the Trip Report written by Air America’s Capt. T. R. Frazer: “Departed Saigon as crewmember on N11014 (DHC-4) for V-32 to RON [= Remain Overnight] about 1755 28 April 1975. About 1820 contact by OM [= Operations Manager] that unusual activity going on V-01 [= at Saigon’s Tan Son Nhut Airport], and when we arrived V-32 to stay there. On arrival V-32, we found bad oil leak #1 engine. […] The mechanic worked most of the night on same with little improvement. During the night, VNAF aircraft started to come in with refugees, and by morning our aircraft was blocked. […] We did try to move the aircraft to an area where it would not be blocked, but on the way, [an] AC-119 landed and blocked the runway, and we had to drag the aircraft back. Then another aircraft blocked us in again. As more aircraft came in, the situation grew more tense with refugees, ARVN, and VNAF personnel. Our facility offered much assistance, but it was inadequate. About 1230, VP-South China Sea Division John Ford advised our crew to go to the LORAN station – a chopper, “110”, picked us up and put us aboard the Barbour County about 1500L 29 April.\footnote{Frazer report at \url{http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/15/c05273125.pdf}.} All of these aircraft parts and other properties were abandoned at Con Son Island on 29 April 75 together with DHC-4 N11014.\footnote{B. D. Mesecher, “AAM property – summary”, in: UTD/CIA/B17F4.} Its ultimate fate is unknown.

For a couple of months in 1975, Air America owned one more DHC-4, N6080, but this was only a paper transaction with Intermountain in exchange for 2 of Air America’s Volpars, and the aircraft never came to South East Asia, but was ferried from Intermountain’s home at Marana, AZ to Roswell, NM on 6 August 75,\footnote{Summary of aircraft sales, in: UTD/CIA/B40F6.} that is to the place where Air America’s remaining aircraft were stored.

As to the smaller aircraft once flown by Air America in South Vietnam, the Dorniers and the Apaches were sold in 1973/4, and even the Helio Couriers, 9 of which had flown for the Company in South Vietnam still in May 68, had gone by 1970, when all of them were operated out of Vientiane; on 12 March 74, after some time of storage at Udorn and Tainan, all remaining Helios were sold in the Philippines.\footnote{Summary of aircraft sales, in: UTD/CIA/B40F6.} So none of these aircraft participated in the evacuation of Saigon. In the mid-sixties, the backbone of Air America’s operations in South Vietnam had been the Twin Beeches, and here the situation is more complex. In June 69, no less than 3 Beech C-45s, 8 Ten-Twos, and 10 Volpars were based at Saigon – with 4 C-45s and 1 Ten-Two in storage elsewhere.\footnote{Summary of aircraft sales, in: UTD/CIA/B40F6; Air America, owned aircraft as of 30 September 75, in: UTD/CIA/B56F1.} Another 2 years later, in November 73, we have 10 active Volpars based at Saigon; Ten-Two N77Y is still in inactive storage at Saigon, Ten-Two N6622C is now listed as inactivated at Saigon on 1 February 70 – and another 12 Ten-
Twos and C-45s are given as “surveyed aircraft” that had been put into inactive storage at Tainan in 1969. In May 74, this situation is still unchanged, but in June 74, 7 Twin Beech aircraft were sold for scrap in Tainan, followed by the 5 Ten-Twos in December 74. The 2 Ten-Twos stored at Saigon were originally sold for scrap to a South Vietnamese company in October 74, but as Air America was unable to get government approval prior to evacuation, these aircraft were actually abandoned on 29 April 75. The first Volpars to receive a new owner were former Udorn-based N3728G and N9542Z, which became part of an aircraft exchange with Intermountain Aviation in February 75. Both had been ferried from Udorn to Saigon on 30 June 74 and both are believed to have left Saigon prior to the evacuation. They were followed by former Bangkok-based N9664C and N9671C, which were sold to Ciba-Pilatus Aerial Spraying of Switzerland in April 75. Volpar N9671C had originally been part of the fleet operating out of Udorn, but had been ferried from Udorn to Bangkok on 23 June 74. On 20 March 75, Air America’s Vice President South Vietnam Division sent a telex to the Company’s Washington office proposing a schedule for moving the excess aircraft that this very day were at Tainan and at Saigon: As to the Twin Beech fleet, the following aircraft were at Tainan already on 20 March 75: former Bangkok-based Ten-Two N7950C, and 5 Volpars, that is former Bangkok-based N9664C, former Udorn-based N9671C and 3 Volpars that were formerly based at Saigon: N9956Z, N6154U, and N9518Z. “For the SGN based aircraft, again assuming the use of some non AAM flight crews, we propose the following movement: [...] VTB-18 N91295 depart SGN E05, VTB-18 N3674G depart SGN E13.” But then, some Volpars left Saigon a couple of days earlier: N9838Z and N7695C on 11 April, N3728G on 12 April, and N3674G on 13 April 75. The Saigon Daily Flight Schedule for 28 April 75 gives 4 Volpars that were still at Saigon that day: N7770B (the night stand-by aircraft), as well as N9157Z, N9542Z, and N9577Z, which had not been scheduled for that day. The Saigon Daily Flight Schedule for 29 April 75 even lists only 3 Volpars: N7770B, N9157Z, and N9577Z. Of these 3-4 aircraft, Volpar N9577Z, was abandoned at Tan Son Nhut airport. Boyd Mesecher notes: “Volpar N9577Z was parked on the AAM ramp, in front of the passenger terminal and was still there at 1600L on 29 April when I left the DAO ECC by AAM helicopter N47004 and went to the U.S. ships off shore by Vung Tau.” This was the Volpar that was to take out Paul Velte. But when his pilot Ed Adams came to pick up his passenger, Velte had already left the location so that Adams took one of the C-46s. So these 2-3 Volpars only (N7770B and N9157Z, plus perhaps N9542Z) participated in the evacuation of Saigon. Capt. K. F. Herrington reports how he flew Volpar N7770B to Hong Kong: “On 29 April at approximately 1000 I was evacuated from rooftop at 87 Nguyen Dinh Chieu by Air America helicopter piloted by Captain David Kendall and

230 Flight Operations Circular no. DOC-C-73-015 of 1 November 73, in: UTD/Hickler/B8F7C.
231 Flight Operations Circular no. DOC-C-74-005 of 1 May 74, in: UTD/Hickler/B8F7C.
237 N9838Z (flown by Capt. Burrows) and N7695C (flown by Capt. Adams) left Saigon for Brunei-Zamboanga etc. (Saigon Daily Flight Schedule for 11 April 75, in: UTD/Walker/B31F6).
238 The Saigon Daily Flight Schedule for 12 April 75 (in: UTD/Walker/B31F6) gives N3728G as destined for being ferried to Tainan that day, but no crew was already scheduled.
239 Volpar N3674G (flown by Messrs. Nolen and Bartlett) left Saigon for Con Son Island (V-32) and Brunei on 13 April 75 (Saigon Daily Flight Schedule, in: UTD/Walker/B31F6).
Frank Stergar. Upon arriving at the Air America compound I checked in and inspected my assigned aircraft (N7770B), a long range Volpar. […] After all fixed wing aircraft departed, I, was alone on the ramp. There were 2 Volpars and one Porter flyable remaining. I remained from 45 to 60 minutes longer hoping more flight crews would show up. To pass the time I loaded a few pieces of abandoned gear and luggage from the office and ramp. I more than implied to the crowd of Vietnamese (mostly military) that they could not get aboard. The Tiger Circuit radio in traffic was still operating and over this radio I informed Capt. Winston, Chief Pilot, that the ramp was becoming difficult to hold alone because of the mob. Capt. Winston advised me to leave since it was extremely doubtful that any other crew members or company personnel could make it to our ramp. Luckily during starting a few more explosions rattled the ramp and most of the mob ran back into our passenger terminal. […] Tan Son Nhu was abandoned. […] I took off without hesitation. […] I was cleared to ‘Charlie Charlie’ and thence by radar vectors to Kai Tak airport. Capt. Steve Sadler was in Customs when I arrived.”

In June 75, a total of 13 Volpars were still at Tainan, including the 4 aircraft intended for Intermountain and for Ciba-Pilatus.

The situation of Air America’s PC-6C Porters is equally complex. As a successor to the Helio Courier, the Porter had been Air America’s workhorse in Laos and in South Vietnam. When operations in Laos were closed down in mid-May 74, seven PC-6C Porters formerly operated in Laos had already been put in temporary storage at Udorn, while eleven Porters were based at Saigon. But of these eleven Porters, only six were assigned to USAID contract C-1029, while two were used as spare aircraft, and three Porters – N12450, N153L, and N285L – were in temporary storage at Saigon. On 1 May 74, one more Porter (N194X) had been taken to temporary storage at Saigon, while the seven Porters formerly operated in Laos had been assigned to Bangkok as spare aircraft in the meantime. On 23 June 74, Porters N359F, N360F, and N5302F were ferried from Bangkok to Saigon, and the other

245 Air America owned aircraft, 30 September 75, in: UTD/CIA/B56F1.
246 See the files Air America in Laos of this database and the telex of 3 June 74 in: UTD/CIA/B31F10.
248 Flight Operations Circular no. DOC-C-74-004 of 1 April 74, in: UTD/Hickler/B8F7C.
249 Flight Operations Circular no. DOC-C-74-005 of 1 May 74, in: UTD/Hickler/B8F7C.
ex-Laotian PC-6Cs probably joined them at Saigon in the same period of time. Sales of surplus Porters began in August 74, when N3612R was sold to Evergreen Helicopters, followed by N5302F in February 75.\textsuperscript{251} On 20 March 75, VPSVND cabled to Air America’s Washington Office that “we have started the disassembly and crating process on one PC6C, N12450. This first one should be completed by C26 [= 26 March 75]. We envision that follow on PC6C aircraft will require above one week per aircraft to disassemble and crate. Please advise your approval to proceed with crating of all stored PC6C aircraft. […] Presume N153L would be last one to crate.”\textsuperscript{252} Evidently the approval was given, as the “Saigon Post Evacuation Report – Ground Maintenance” of 28 May 75 notes: “PC-6 Porter Boxing/Shipping Status as of 29 April 1975: a) Aircraft boxed and shipped approximately 21 April 1975: N12450, spare N184L, N285L, N194X, N198X, N9444, and N394R.”\textsuperscript{253} Although originally destined for New Orleans, LA, the aircraft were shipped to the port of Brooklyn, New York, where they arrived on 15 June 75; on 19 June 75, all of these Porters were sold to Omni Aircraft Sales, Washington, DC,\textsuperscript{254} and registered to Omni on 10 July 75.\textsuperscript{255} In the summer of 1975, they were returned to Pilatus Aircraft in Switzerland, and later they were operated in the Sudan.

The second batch of Porters was less lucky. Boyd Mesecher reports what happened to them on 29 April 75: “We had also completed the crating of 4 more Porter aircraft and had 2 others in the process of crating. There were 3 additional Porters disassembled and awaiting crating, the 2 operational Porter aircraft were abandoned on the AAM ramp.”\textsuperscript{257} Air America’s “Saigon Post Evacuation Report – Ground Maintenance” of 28 May 75 gives a more detailed and slightly different picture: “Aircraft boxed and ready for shipment. Left at Tan Son Nhu Airbase: N355F, N358F, N359F, and N748N.”\textsuperscript{258} For N360F, the document notes: “The wrapping and preservation work was completed and the fuselage and parts installed in the box.”\textsuperscript{259} For N365F and N366F, the document notes: “The wrapping and preservation work was completed.”\textsuperscript{260} Apparently, these 3 Porters were in the process of crating. For N367F, N192X, and N185K, the document notes: “All material for the in-house packing and closing was purchased and on hand. 5% of the in-house labor was completed. Wrapping and preservation was not done on any of these aircraft.”\textsuperscript{261} Apparently, these are the 3 Porters referred to above as “disassembled and awaiting crating”, leaving only one operational PC-6C Porter: N153L. The document notes: “N153L: Aircraft was not scheduled for boxing and shipping as of the evac date. Abandoned on the ramp with engine and propeller installed. […] All aircraft remaining in Saigon, excepting N153L, had been disassembled and all engines

\textsuperscript{251} Summary of aircraft sales, in: UTD/CIA/B40F6.
\textsuperscript{252} VPSVND, telex to Washington Office dated 20 March 75, in: UTD/CIA/B18F2.
\textsuperscript{253} N184L was sold without engine (Summary of aircraft sales, in: UTD/CIA/B40F6). In the same document, N184L is also listed among the aircraft abandoned at Saigon on 29 April 75, and a note adds: “Although MSN 557 (N184L) was lost, we were able to substitute the spare fuselage and sell the components without the engine as reported under entry dated 19 June 75.”
\textsuperscript{254} “Saigon Post Evacuation Report – Ground Maintenance”, dated 28 May 75 and sent by SA/DTS, Saigon to DTS SVND, Hong Kong; see also Report dated 28 May 75, in: UTD/CIA/B18F7, and the undated report by Boyd D. Mesecher, in: UTD/CIA/B17F4; both reports speak of 22 April 75 as day of departure from Saigon.
\textsuperscript{255} Letter by Clyde S. Carter dated 28 October 75, in: UTD/CIA/B56F2.
\textsuperscript{256} Letters by Paul C. Velte dated 19 June 75 and by Clyde S. Carter dated 28 October 75, in: UTD/CIA/B17F4.
\textsuperscript{258} “Saigon Post Evacuation Report – Ground Maintenance”, dated 28 May 75 and sent by SA/DTS, Saigon to DTS SVND, Hong Kong.
\textsuperscript{259} “Saigon Post Evacuation Report – Ground Maintenance”, dated 28 May 75 and sent by SA/DTS, Saigon to DTS SVND, Hong Kong.
\textsuperscript{260} “Saigon Post Evacuation Report – Ground Maintenance”, dated 28 May 75 and sent by SA/DTS, Saigon to DTS SVND, Hong Kong.
\textsuperscript{261} “Saigon Post Evacuation Report – Ground Maintenance”, dated 28 May 75 and sent by SA/DTS, Saigon to DTS SVND, Hong Kong.
and props removed.”\textsuperscript{262} The loss of most Porters was indicated to the FAA on 11 June 75,\textsuperscript{263} but Air America’s Senior Vice President Clyde S. Carter requested that their registrations were not yet cancelled. In a second letter to the FAA dated 25 June 75,\textsuperscript{264} Carter indicated the loss of Porter N153L and of the 2 Bell 205s, and this time he asked the FAA to cancel their registries. With the exception of N153L and those 2 Bell 205s, all Air America aircraft that had been abandoned in South Vietnam on 29 April 75, remained on the US Civil Aircraft Register for a couple of years. While all Porters that had been disassembled and were in various states of crating at the time of the evacuation, were never heard of again and were probably scrapped after the Communist take-over, N153L, the only operational PC-6C Porter abandoned at Tan Son Nhut on 29 April 75, seems to have been flown in Vietnam even after the Communist take-over. As this was the only operational PC-6C Porter abandoned at Tan Son Nhut airport on 29 April 75, it is believed that it was also the mysterious Air America “Beaver” that had been noted stored in a revetment at Bien Hoa Air Base, Vietnam, in 1998.\textsuperscript{265} For Air America did not have any Beavers in 1975.

\textsuperscript{262} “Saigon Post Evacuation Report – Ground Maintenance”, dated 28 May 75 and sent by SA/DTS, Saigon to DTS SVND, Hong Kong.

\textsuperscript{263} Letter no. WC-75-1206 dated 11 June 75, in: UTD/CIA/B17F4.

\textsuperscript{264} Letter no. WC-75-1363 dated 25 June 75, in: UTD/CIA/B17F4.

\textsuperscript{265} Air-Britain News, August 99, p.1035.
Letter no. WC-75-1206 sent by Air America’s Clyde S. Carter to the FAA on 11 June 75 (in: UTD/CIA/B17F4)

On their way to the USA

While all of Air America’s fixed wing aircraft that had not been sold prior to the collapse of South Vietnam, but had escaped from Saigon in April 75, gathered at Tainan, where some if not all of them were refurbished for further sale in the US – no less than 21 of them were positioned at Tainan in June 75\(^{266}\) –, the survivors among Air America’s helicopters had finally been granted asylum on the U.S. ships waiting some 40 miles off shore of the port city of Vung Tau. The fate of the UH-1Hs, which Air America had bailed from the US Army, is well documented by a report called “Supply Support for Air America Inc” that US Army

\(^{266}\) Air America, Owned aircraft as of 30 September 75, in: UTD/CIA/B56F1.
officers sent to the Commanders of the US Army Japan and the US Army Garrison of Okinawa in June 75. According to this report, all surviving UH-1Hs were aboard 3 ships, that is the USS Blue Ridge, the USS Hancock, and the USS Midway. As to Air America’s own helicopters, Bell 204B N8535F was still impounded on the USS Blue Ridge, later joined by N8512F Bell 204Bs N1303X, N1304X, and N1306X as well as Bell 205 N47004 landed on the USS Hancock. Bell 204B N8514F travelled on the USS Midway together with Air America crew members Robert Hitchman, William Gartz, Chancey Collard, Herman Gehring, Joe Weiss, George Taylor, Larry Stadulis, and Ralph Begien, Bell 204B N1307X on the USS Duluth, N8513F on the USS Denver, and N1305X on the USS Oklahoma. Aircraft aboard the USS Blue Ridge, the USS Hancock, USS Denver, USS Duluth, and the USS Oklahoma were off-loaded at Cubi Point, Subic Bay, Philippines, and aircraft aboard the USS Midway were off-loaded at Guam. After off-loading at both places, the bailed UH-1Hs were returned to US Army control. At Cubi Point, Air America’s own helicopters were maintained by AVSCOM (US Army Aviation Systems Command, St. Louis, MI) personnel in May 75 and remained there until 17 July 75. Between 17 July 75 and 18 August 75, the helicopters were shipped to Corpus Christi, TX, where they remained until 8 September 75. Finally, between 8 and 10 September 75, they were transported by truck from Corpus Christi.


269 Aircraft summary as of May 75, in: UTD/CIA/B51F12.

270 Aircraft summary as of May 75, in: UTD/CIA/B51F12.

271 Letter no. WC-75-1016, sent by Air America to the US Army on 13 May 75, in: UTD/CIA/B17F5.


273 Aircraft summary as of May 75, in: UTD/CIA/B51F12.

274 Aircraft summary as of May 75, in: UTD/CIA/B51F12.

275 Aircraft summary as of May 75, in: UTD/CIA/B51F12.

276 For details and references see the Bell 204 and Bell 205 aircraft files of this database.
Tony Coalson had just landed his Bell 204B N1306X on the *USS Hancock* on 29 April 1975
(with kind permission from the photographer, former Air America pilot Tony Coalson)

The *USS Hancock* on a postcard, with the location where Tony Coalson landed his
Air America Bell 204B N1306X on 29 April 1975
(with kind permission from the photographer, Tony Coalson)
Air America Bell 204B N1306X and others aboard the *USS Hancock*, probably on 29 April 75 (Photo no. 1WL4-21-76-6PC5, in: UTD/Leary/B76F6; this photo was taken by Tony Coalson)

Air America Bell 204Bs and Bell 205s aboard the USS Hancock in May 1975 (with kind permission from the photographer, former Air America pilot Tony Coalson)
Air America Bell 204B N1304X inside the *USS Hancock* in May 1975
(with kind permission from the photographer, former Air America pilot Tony Coalson)

On their way back to the US: Air America crews inside the *USS Hancock* in May 1975
(with kind permission from the photographer, former Air America pilot Tony Coalson)
to Roswell, NM, where they were stored awaiting sale. Only Bell 204B N8514F had a different itinerary: After it had been off-loaded at Guam, the USS The Greenwave took it to Corpus Christi, TX, departing Guam on 27 May 75 and arriving at Corpus Christi on 18 June 75. From there, it was transported by rail to Roswell, NM, where it was stored awaiting sale.

Roswell in New Mexico was also the next stop for all of Air America’s fixed wing aircraft that had not yet been sold by July 75. For between 15 June 75 and 9 September 75, a total of 2 C-46s (N67984 and N67985), 2 DHC-4s (N539Y and N544Y), 1 DHC-6 (N6868), and 11 Volpars (N3728G, N9542Z, N3674G, N6154U, N7770B, N9518Z, N9956Z, N7695C, N9157Z, N91295, and N9838Z) departed Tainan for Roswell, NM – but one aircraft was lost enroute: In the morning of 22 September 75, Volpar N3674G departed Midway Island for Adak, the Aleutians, together with Volpar N7695C and DHC-6 N6868. But “VTB N3674G failed to arrive at Adak, its last enroute ferry point, and as of 30 September 1975 neither the aircraft nor its pilot have been located although an unconfirmed report reaching Air America’s Washington office on September 29, 1975 advised that search and rescue parties in the Adak area had sighted a life raft with two suitcases aboard 18 miles south of Atka island on the afternoon of September 27, 1975 which items had been identified as belonging to the missing aircraft.”

The ferry flight of N3674G to Roswell, NM had already been scheduled for the period between 19 and 28 August 75, and the ferry crew belonged to Transavia International of Saint Louis.

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277 Letter by Air America’s Clyde S. Carter dated 22 May 75, in: UTD/CIA/B17F4; Air America, owned aircraft as of 30 September 75, in: UTD/CIA/B56F1. The hangar/storage space in Roswell NM was on a one-year lease expiring on 31 May 76 (CIA Liquidation Plan of January/February 76, p.4, online readable at: http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/1818029/197616.pdf).


279 Air America, Owned aircraft, as of 30 September 1975, in: UTD/CIA/B56F1.

Company at that time, recalls this flight: “Seven contracted ferry crews which included myself were sent from the USA to Tainan, Taiwan to fly the aircraft. To the best of my knowledge, CAT nor AAM had regularly employed flight crews at the time. We departed Tainan 7 Sept. 75. Our itinerary and flight plan were to fly the seven aircraft all in a group from Tainan across the Pacific to Roswell, New Mexico with refueling stops at Palau, Guam, Midway Island, Adak, Anchorage, and Seattle. The seven aircraft consisted of two C-46s, two DeHavilland DHC-4s, and three ‘Volpar’ Beechcraft. I flew a C-46 and as the senior pilot was designated in charge of the group. One DHC-4 had engine problems and broke down enroute at Midway Island. That aircraft was left behind to await an engine change before it would proceed weeks later to Roswell. One Volpar with its pilot was lost at sea near Adak, Alaska. The remaining two C-46s, one DHC-4, and two Volpars continued the trip arriving in Roswell without further mishap.”

The itinerary of Air America’s remaining aircraft from Tainan to Roswell (Air America, Owned aircraft, 30 September 1975, in: UTD/CIA/B56F1)

Connie Seigrist also gives some details about the loss of Volpar N3674G and its pilot: “The Volpar lost near Adak had radio/navigation electrical problems continually throughout its trip which had begun shortly after take-off from Tainan. The pilot of the Volpar, Jerry Swoboda from Florida, an exceptionally nice, handsome, and intelligent gentleman on our first stop at Palau suggested he would like to continue with the group by flying loose formation on the wing of one of the other Volpars. All agreed it was the sensible, the thing to

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do until we arrived in Guam where there were maintenance facilities for repairs. The malfunction was corrected after our arrival in Guam. So we thought. Soon after departure from Guam he lost radio communications again and one of the other Volpar pilots reported Jerry had moved in on their wing, gave a thumbs up signal indicating all else was OK, and he remained in loose formation to Midway our next stop. Midway is a USN Base and we found to our disappointment repairs for light civilian aircraft electronic gear was non-existent. The weather from Midway was forecasted to be good the entire route to Adak. With the good weather report Jerry wanted to continue on. All agreed and we departed Midway with him again in his usual formation as wingman on another Volpar. Two hours out of Adak we flew into some thin clouds which soon after became solid, and the pilot of the lead Volpar reported Jerry had disappeared from sight due to the density of the clouds. I didn’t give it much concern because I recalled I had been caught in as bad or worse flying conditions in the past and with little common judgment I had continued my flight safely. I arrived over Adak within a minute of the lead Volpar. Jerry’s Volpar was not in sight. We were on top of the clouds in the clear with an occasional break in the clouds through which I could see the ocean and occasionally some land. With that promising sight I knew Jerry would make it just fine. He didn’t. The next morning with no incoming report of Jerry having arrived at another station we had no choice but to accept the fact he had encountered a bad situation. Both the Navy and the Coast Guard were stationed at Adak. They had a computer in operation there for the purpose of helping locate anything lost at sea. The computer was fed with the information to plot a position in the likely area the Volpar could have ditched. From that position they further fed the computer to give a life raft traveled position by using the estimated water currents, tides, and wind effects in the area since the time he was presumed lost. All our aircraft had inflatable life rafts aboard for survival in case of having to ditch an aircraft at sea. Two days later with that information his dinghy was found with his Haliburton suitcase and flight kit tied to it. He was not to be found, but his dinghy and gear being tied to it indicated he had ditched in the ocean safely and due to that evidence without doubt he had been aboard his dinghy at some time. It was a sad loss for all.”

At Roswell, some of the former Air America aircraft were stored in the open air, like Twin Otter N6868, which had been painted all white at Tainan. Other former Air America aircraft including the remaining helicopters were stored inside a hangar building at Roswell. On 13 November 75, an agreement was reached with Omni Aircraft Sales, Washington DC, that Omni would buy all remaining aircraft, assorted spares and the entire remaining inventory of Air America at a total of $ 3,925,000.00. But at that time, not all of the aircraft included in the agreement were ready. Connie Seigrist recalls: “January 1976: Dave Gluskin, Roswell Base Manager, telephoned me (I was living in Tucson) from Roswell that the DHC-4 left behind at Midway had been repaired and flown to Hawaii, and that he wanted my help in finding a navigator to navigate its flight from Hawaii to SFO [= San Francisco]. Our search for a navigator was unsuccessful. I volunteered that I could navigate the trip if there was a Loran system aboard. Dave said that there was Loran installed already. With that Dave authorized me to proceed to HNL [= Honolulu] as Capt/Nav taking captain Stan Nye formerly of Intermountain Aviation, Marana, Arizona to HNL with me to ferry the DHC-4 to SFO by way of Hilo. Stan and I arrived in Honolulu to fly the DHC-4, license number 539Y. It was the last aircraft flying under the CAT/Air America name. It was not quite ready for flight. Cabin fuel tanks and an engine oil reserve tank had been installed but not tested. […] 539Y was released after a couple of days.”

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283 Summary of aircraft sales as of 17 November 75, in: UTD/CIA/B40F6.
This ferry flight turned out to be a nightmare. After waiting for good weather for a couple of days, finally, as Connie Seigrist recalls, on “3 Feb 76, Honolulu weather station forecasted good weather conditions for at least the next two days on our route of flight. Stan and I checked out of HNL and flew to Hilo. […] 4 Feb 76: Stan and I went to the Hilo airport before daybreak and prepared 539Y for flight. […] We took to the air with everything functioning normally other than our rate of climb. […] When about 50 miles out of Hilo hell broke loose so to speak. We began to smell high octane fuel. Within seconds before I could get out of the cockpit to investigate the source the smell increased to almost suffocation. By the time I stepped down in the cabin where the ferry tanks were installed the floor of the aircraft was wet with fuel. Knowing vapors from high octane aircraft fuel to be an unstable
explosive I realized 539Y had suddenly become a flying bomb. [...] Just any little insignificant electric spark could now ignite the gaseous vapors and blow us into smithereens. [...] 539Y had two ferry tanks installed in the cabin. I immediately noticed the forward largest tank to have fuel gushing out of the hole on top of the tank where the venting hose had been attached. The venting hose about 3 inches in diameter had disintegrated for some reason but the fuel still continued coming up and out of the tank onto the floor. [...] To lower the fuel in the tank to stop the streaming appeared to be the quickest correction to the problem. [...] I quickly moved the hose around the slipstream until I located a position off to the side of the tail gate that would let the fuel leave the aircraft freely into the sky. My clothes were now wet with fuel. The fuel became lower in the tank after a few minutes as a result of the dumping and the streaming stopped. I closed the fuel dump valve and after about an hour the aircraft was safely clear of fumes. [...] When I felt it was safe to activate the Loran I switched it on to plot our position. It didn’t work. [...] Regardless of our estimated flight plan of 15 hours I was very confident I could dead reckon right to the Golden Gate. [...] When we were approaching mid-point between Hilo and SFO, [...] the time flown thus far showed I should replenish some of the engine oil that should have been consumed. [...] I turned the engine oil selector handle to the right engine and switched on the pump motor. The pump jerked into its deep whine and the heavy rubber hose flinched into rigidity as the pump pressured the oil through. I started timing. In no more than 30 seconds as I was facing the pump, quicker than my eyes could see, the hose split open under the pressure, and oil virtually exploded simultaneously out of the split, as if shot from a cannon into the cabin, drenching me in the process. [...] The mishap presented no danger of fire or undesirable vapors from the oil as the fuel had. The emergency ended almost as fast as it had happened. [...] But I was sure the tanks were replenished enough to get us to SFO. [...] When we were an hour and a half out of SFO we started flying into some clouds. [...] I was not uncomfortable about this turn of events thinking the clouds were of a local weather phenomenon of no major importance. Within ten minutes I changed my mind when we heard the propellers throwing ice against the fuselage and our airspeed indicated we were slowing down. The loss of airspeed indicated our wings were collecting ice which was spoiling the airflow across the wings influencing the loss of lift. [...] I continued calling SFO. Finally SFO answered. [...] We were now down to 5000 ft and descending fast in trying to keep our airspeed above stalling. They gave us a vector straight to International. [...] We made it OK and landed at the airport parking at the Butler Aviation Hangar. When we parked and shut down the engines we realized that we were half frozen.”

Material, equipment and documents abandoned

The aircraft that Air America had to abandon in South Vietnam on 29 April 75 have already been dealt with in the previous chapters: Caribou N11014 was engaged in transporting “aircraft parts and ground property sent to V01 Alternate (Con Son Island)”, where all of those aircraft parts and other properties had to be abandoned together with the aircraft. Volpar N9577Z was abandoned at Tan Son Nhut airport, after its passenger Paul Velte and its

pilot Ed Adams had chosen other aircraft to bring them out of Saigon – it had probably been damaged during the evacuation. Two of Air America’s Bell 205s that had formerly flown in Laos as XW-PFG and XW-PFH were lost during the evacuation of Saigon: N47000 (former XW-PFG) was forced to ditch into the South China Sea near the USS Blue Ridge on 29 April 75, and N47001 (former XW-PFH) was not flyable due to an engine change and had to be abandoned at Tan Son Nhut. One of the UH-1Hs bailed from the US Army, that is “70-15856”, had to be left on the ramp, because it had been badly damaged by an NVA rocket. And then, as has been seen above, there were no less than 11 PC-6C Porters that had to be left behind at Tan Son Nhut airport, while they were in various states of crating – N153L had to be abandoned even fully operational.

According to a calculation preserved at the Air America Archives, the book value of the aircraft abandoned in South Vietnam in April 75 was $386,520.55. A further $9,572.82 has to be added to this sum for POL, that is for petroleum, oil, and lubricant, but also a book value of no less than $176,908.62 for all sorts of equipment and ground property that had to be abandoned in South Vietnam, like ramp equipment, maintenance and engineering equipment, surface transportation vehicles and equipment, furniture and office equipment, or buildings and land leased. It is not known if this calculation already includes similar losses at Danang, Nha Trang, Can Tho and the other Air America stations and offices all over South Vietnam, all of which had to be evacuated in a very precipitate way.

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“Properties abandoned in South Vietnam due to forced evacuation on 4/29/75”
(in: UTD/CIA/B18F7)

290 For details see the aircraft files of this database.
But while the loss of all this was only a material loss, the loss of Company documents that had to be left behind in South Vietnam may have had consequences for some people remaining in Vietnam. Although some Company records had been transported to Hong Kong and Tainan by Air America aircraft in the last days of April 75, Air America had hoped to return to their offices at Tan Son Nhut airport after the arrival of the Marines. As no Marine Guard arrived as protection, Air America was unable to use their own fuel depot for the helicopter evacuation and “was unable to return to their area to recover any documents or destroy that which could not be removed. Various personnel reported that late in the afternoon of 29 April, the AAI Area was in smoke and flames. However, since most of the AAI facilities are of metal and concrete, it is assumed that the prepositioned drums of fuel were ignited and that the AAI facilities fell into the Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG) hands.”

Certainly, Air America had succeeded in evacuating all of their employees together with their dependents, but it is unknown what happened in Communist Vietnam to the dependents of dependents of people who had worked for what was considered to be the CIA airline.

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291 C-54 B-1016 and one C-46 are known to have flown such missions; see above for details.