"Last Flights: Air America and the Collapse of South Vietnam"

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"FINAL FLIGHTS: AIR AMERICA AND THE COLLAPSE OF SOUTH VIETNAM, 1975"

By William M. Leary

Jalonick Memorial Lecture
The University of Texas at Dallas
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August 13, 2005

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Air America had fallen on hard times as Vietnam welcomed the Year of the Rabbit at the beginning of 1975. The airline that had been secretly owned by the Central Intelligence Agency since 1950 was a far cry from the giant air complex of the late 1960s and early 1970s. In 1970, the airline operated a fleet of 146 aircraft that included Boeing 727s, DC-6s, C-46s, C-47s, C-123s, Twin-Beech Volpars, Pilatus Porters, Helio Couriers, and a variety of helicopters. It employed over 500 pilots, primarily in Southeast Asia. In June 1974, however, Air America shut down its operations in Laos, where it had been serving as a paramilitary adjunct to the native forces that were fighting the CIA's "Secret War." Three months later, the CIA confirmed an earlier decision to sell the air complex, setting the date for its demise as June 30, 1975.[1]

Morale among Air America employees was at low ebb, as pilots and technical personnel left in large numbers, anticipating the company's closure. Meanwhile, flying continued, primarily helicopter operations for the International Commission of Control and Supervision (ICCS) – the agency created to monitor the peace agreement of 1973 – and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). But the end was clearly in sight, both for the airline and for the country. In the summer of 1974, the U.S. House of Representatives had voted a sharp reduction in aid to South Vietnam. Shortly thereafter, President Richard M. Nixon had been forced to resign in the wake of the Watergate scandal. An evacuation plan for South Vietnam – initially labeled TALON VISE but later changed to FRE-

[1] Leary, "CIA Air Operations in Laos, 1955-1974," Studies in Intelligence 42 (Winter 1998): 51-67.

QUENT WIND – was in place, with U.S. Ambassador Graham Martin in charge. In the fall of 1974, Vice Admiral George P. Steele, commander of the Seventh Fleet, had met with Martin to review the plan. "Do not worry, Admiral," Martin had reassured Steele, "I will initiate the evacuation in good time. I understand the necessity for doing so."[2]

In mid-December 1974, the North Vietnamese launched a winter-spring offensive against Phuoc Long province. The purpose of the operation was less to acquire control of territory in the south than to test the willingness of the United States to respond to a blatant violation of the peace agreement. There was little alarm in the U.S. intelligence community to the fighting in Phuoc Long. A National Intelligence Estimate on December 23 forecast that Hanoi would avoid the "risks and losses" of a major offensive and work to achieve its goals though a "political-military campaign." An all-out offensive, the intelligence community believed, would not be likely before early in 1976.[3]

Not for the first time in the Vietnam War, the intelligence crystal ball proved cloudy. Phuoc Binh City fell to the NVA on January 7, 1975, the first provincial capital to pass into the hands of northern forces since the cease-fire of 1973. As it was clear that Washington would not act, the Politburo in Hanoi approved a plan for widespread attacks in the south in 1975, followed by a general uprising in 1976. The offensive would begin in the long-contested Central Highlands.[4]

Campaign 275 opened on March 1, 1975. Within two weeks, the NVA offensive had made such progress that President Thieu ordered the Central Highlands abandoned. At the same time, NVA forces were pouring south of the DMZ, heading from Hue and Danang. Marius Burke, the senior Air America pilot at Danang, had only four helicopters to meet the growing airlift demands caused by the NVA offensive. On March 23, Air America evacuated key personnel from Hue and Quang Nhai. On the 25th, while engaged in the evacuation effort, an Air America helicopter was fired on by supposedly friendly South Vietnamese troops. It took hits in the rotor blade spar and engine but managed to limp back to Danang. Clearly, Burke reported to Saigon, the situation had reached "a critical state," and that panicking South Vietnamese troops posed as great – if not greater –

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2 A.J.C. Lavalle (ed.), Last Flight from Saigon (Office of Air Force History, 1978), p. 9; George R. Dunham and David A. Quinlan, U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Bitter End, 1973-1975 (U.S. Marine Corps, 1990), p. 53

3 NIE 53/14.3-2-74, "Short-Term Prospects for Vietnam, 23 December 1975," in National Intelligence Council, Estimative Products on Vietnam, 1948-1975 (Government Printing Office, 2005), pp. 633-43.

4 Arnold R. Isaacs, Without Honor: Defeat in Vietnam and Cambodia (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), pp. 331-33.

danger than the NVA.[5]

That same day, a meeting was held at CIA headquarters in Washington to discuss Air America's ability to respond to the increasing demands for air service. Paul Velte, Air America's chief executive officer, reviewed the company's equipment status for his CIA superiors. Air America owned and operated 12 Bell 204B/205 helicopters, civilian models of the military's UH-1B/D Hueys. In addition, the company had on loan from the military 16 UH-1Hs. Eleven of the "bailed" Hueys were on the ICCS lease, while 5 were on a USAID lease. Three of the 11 ICCS helicopters were currently in use for the commission's diminishing requirements, while the other 8 were in flyable storage. It would be difficult to place these 8 Hueys back in service because spare parts for them came from the Department of Defense and were not available on short notice.[6]

The most immediate problem, however, was not aircraft but pilots. Air America, Velte explained, had 77 pilots, both rotary wing and fixed wing, including supervisors. The rotary wing pilots were flying 120 hours a month, the maximum allowable under the USAID contract. Also, the contract called for two pilots per helicopter. Because of the company's uncertain future, pilots and technical personnel were in the process of leaving for other jobs. The first thing to be done, Velte said, was to clarify the identity of the new contractor. Current employees could then apply for jobs with the replacement company. Personnel agreeing to stay with Air America until June 30 would be offered special bonuses. Also, contractual restraints for two pilots and 120 hours should be lifted. While there measures might not completely solve the problem, they certainly would help. Velte then told his superiors that he would leave shortly for South Vietnam to assess the situation and take all necessary action.

Frank Snepp, the CIA's principal analyst in Saigon, had become increasingly concerned about the rapidly deteriorating military situation. Government defenses in the northern half of the country, he told Station Chief Thomas Polgar on March 25, were nearing total collapse. "The entire complexion of the Vietnam War," he observed, "has altered in a matter of weeks, and the government is in imminent danger of decisive military defeat." Polgar, however, refused to become alarmed. He agreed with Ambassador Martin's policy of encouraging the Saigon government to continue resistance in hopes of securing a negotiated settlement. Above all, Americans must not give any indication that they considered the situa-

[5] Ibid.; Leary interview with Burke, July 10, 1987; Burke to Leary, June 20, 2004.

[6] Czajkowski interview with Velte, May 29, 1976; Cable, CIA Station Saigon to Director, March 25, 1975, Leary Collection.

tion hopeless.[7]

As refugees poured into Danang, Burke prepared for the worst. He cut personnel to a minimum, with one pilot and Filipino flight mechanic per aircraft. He asked for volunteers who would be willing to remain and face the hazards of the final evacuation. His four helicopters would be kept fully fueled and ready for immediate departure.[8]

The evacuation of Danang began on March 28. By the morning of the 29th, Burke reported, the city was "a shambles," with abandoned aircraft, tanks, trucks, and other vehicles scattered about. In the midst of the evacuation effort, a World Airways Boeing 727 appeared overhead. Burke tried to contact the pilot to warn him not to land, but did not get a response. As soon as the 727 set down, it was engulfed by a swarm of ARVN and civilian refugees. The runway on which it had landed – 17-Left – was soon littered with bodies and overturned vehicles. Burke again attempted to contact the airplane and direct it to 17-Right, which looked clear, but heard nothing.

By the time the 727 taxied to the front of the control tower, both runways had become unusable. "It looked hopeless," Burke reported. The only option was to use a taxiway. The aircraft started to roll, narrowly missing a stalled van on the side of the taxiway. A motorcycle struck the left wing, and the driver was hurled into the infield. Somehow, the 727 struggled into the air after plowing through various small structures at the end of the field. As Deputy Ambassador Wolf Lehmann later commented about this incident, the attempted evacuation by 727 was "irresponsible, utterly irresponsible, and should never have taken place."[9]

The sudden collapse of South Vietnam's military forces caused American military authorities to review their evacuation plans. The original scheme, published on July 31, 1974, had contained four options. Evacuation would be conducted (1) by commercial airlift from Saigon's Tan Son Nhut airport, (2) by military aircraft from Tan Son Nhut, (3) by sealift from ports serving Saigon, and (4) by helicopters to U.S. Navy ships standing offshore. It now seemed that detailed planning for the helicopter option should go forward.[10]

Air America obviously would be a crucial part of any emergency helicopter evacuation from downtown Saigon. Rooftops that might be

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[7] Snepp, Decent Interval, pp. 232-34.

[8] Burke, "Danang Fiasco."

[9] Lehmann, "'This is the Last Message from Saigon,'" in Larry Engelmann, Tears Before the Rain: An Oral History of the Fall of Vietnam (Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 33-45.

[10] Lavalle, Last Flight, p. 9.

used for the evacuation could not support the heavy Marine Corps aircraft. Only Air America could do the job. Following discussions with Var M. Green, vice president for Vietnam, and Chief Pilot Carl Winston, Air America agreed to take 13 UH-1Hs out of flyable storage. With a total of 28 helicopters, Air America pledged to have 24 of them available at any given time. Because of the shortage of pilots, many of these helicopters would have to be flown by a single pilot. "This was risky," the U.S. Air Force account of the final evacuation observed, "but Air America was accustomed to such risks and expressed no reservations about that aspect of the Saigon air evacuation."[11]

On April 7, veteran helicopter pilot Nikki A. Fillipi began a survey of 37 buildings in downtown Saigon to assess their viability as helicopter landing zones (HLZs). The survey led to the selection of 13 HLZs. Fillipi then supervised crews from the Pacific Architect & Engineering company in removing obstructions that might interfere with safe ingress/egress to the HLZs. An "H" was painted on the rooftops to mark the skids of Air America's helicopters, indicating that aircraft could land or take off in either direction with guaranteed rotor clearance. During his meetings with the Special Planning Group that would be charge of the helicopter evacuation , Fillipi emphasized that three requirements had to be met if Air America was to complete its assigned tasks in the evacuation plan. The Air America ramp had to be secured; helicopters needed a safe supply of fuel; and, to avoid confusion, Air America had to maintain its own communication network, linking with Marine Corps helicopters only through UHF guard frequency. He was assured that all three requirements would be met.

CEO Velte arrived in Saigon on April 7. He consulted with Fillipi on the evacuation planning to date. He then contacted military authorities and asked if they could provide additional pilots to allow double crewing of the helicopters for the emergency. He received a sympathetic response, and a message was sent to CINPAC, requesting the temporary assignment of 30 Marine Corps helicopter pilots so that each Air America aircraft would have a copilot. When Ambassador Martin saw the cable, however, he "hit the ceiling," and sent a "flash" message canceling the request.[12]

Martin's precipitous action was characteristic of what was becoming an increasingly bizarre attitude on the part of the U.S. Embassy as the NVA

[11] Velte interview; Lavalle, Last Flight, pp. 36-37.

[12] Isaacs, Without Honor, pp. 400-01; Amphibious Force, Seventh Fleet, "Evacuation Operations Conducted in Cambodia and the Republic of Vietnam, March-April 1975," copy on the Naval Historical Center, Washington, D.C.

drew closer to Saigon. Even Secretary of State Henry Kissinger was becoming concerned with Martin's actions. "Faced with imminent disaster," Kissinger later wrote, "Martin decided to go down with the ship . . ." He was reluctant to evacuate any Americans lest this contribute to the disintegration of the south. "I considered Martin's stonewalling dangerous," Kissinger recalled. On April 9 he told Ben Bradlee, executive editor of the *Washington Post*, that "we've got an Ambassador who is maybe losing his cool."[13]

The military's efforts to press Martin were proving fruitless. On April 12, the 9th Marine Amphibious Brigade sent a delegation to consult with the ambassador on the evacuation plan. Martin told them that he would not tolerate any outward signs that the United States intended to abandon South Vietnam. All planning would have to be conducted with the utmost discretion. General Carey, the Marine commander, upon receiving this information, flew to Saigon the next day to see Martin. "The visit," Carey reported, "was cold, non-productive and appeared to be an irritant to the ambassador."[14]

The military situation continued to worsen as North Vietnamese forces encircled the capital. On April 21, President Thieu resigned. That same day, the Marines established a forward headquarters at the DAO. The DAO complex, together with Air America area across the street, were designated as the main departure points for a helicopter evacuation to the fleet. A battalion-sized security force would guard the DAO complex, while a battalion command group and one company would be sent to the Air America area.[15]

The Defense Attache also sent a message to Washington, requesting permission to bring a platoon of marines to Tan Son Nhut at once to control the growing crowd of fixed-wing evacuees. Lest Ambassador Martin's sensitivities be upset about the presence of additional U.S. military personnel, Air America helicopters were used on April 25 to bring in 40 marines, dressed in civilian clothes, from the *U.S.S. Hancock*, standing offshore. Once inside the DAO complex, they were able to don their combat gear.[16]

On April 28, as the situation around Saigon continued to worse, Velte learned that General Carey had decided not to provide a security force for the Air America ramp at Tan Son Nhut. This came as a shock. Only the

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[13] Kissinger, Crisis: The Anatomy of Two Major Foreign Policy Crises (Simon & Schuster, 2003), pp. 441, 449-50.

[14] Dunham and Quinlan, U.S. Marines, pp. 145-46.

[15] Dunham and Quinlan, U.S. Marines, p. 153.

[16] Ibid., p. 171.

previous week, Carey had assured Velte that he would send marines to secure the ramp. Velte asked the ambassador to intervene and reverse the decision, emphasizing that the security of the Air America area had been a prerequisite for the company's successful participation in any emergency evacuation plan. There was no immediate response from the embassy.[17]

Later that day, Velte was in Vice President Green's office at Tan Son Nhut, his back to the window, when a heard a flight of jet planes pass overhead shortly after 6 p.m. Suddenly, bombs began to fall, shattering the glass in the window. Five A-37s were attacking the Vietnamese Air Force side of the field. They destroyed three AC-119s, several C-47s, and set off numerous fires. At first, everyone believed that the attack marked the start of a coup. It soon became clear, however, that the aerial assault signalled the beginning of the North Vietnamese offensive against Saigon.

Tan Son Nhut came under intermittent rocket and artillery fire at sundown, but, as Green pointed out, "frequent secondary explosions of fuel and ammunition from the initial [air] attack gave the impression of continuous shelling." Everything became quiet around 8 p.m. Some of the Filipino mechanics began refueling and overnight inspections of the aircraft. Work also started on one helicopter that need major attention after being in storage for several months. Several of the Filipinos, however, remained in shelters and refused to come out. One of these individuals, Ronald C. Liechty, supervisor of helicopter maintenance, recalled, "kept shouting that they were all going to die. This wasn't conducive to getting an work done."[18]

Just before 4 a.m. on April 29, the NVA opened a major rocket and artillery barrage on Tan Son Nhut, with some 40 rounds falling per hour. Although most of the fire was directed at the VNAF side of the field, one round fell in the DAO complex, killing two marine guards. Helicopter pilot Tony Coalson, who had been spending the night at the airport, was trying to catch some sleep on a lumpy bed in the Air America crew center when the first rockets landed. He bolted for the bunker that was just outside operations. An 8' x 8' "PSP sandbag contraption," it was already jammed with some 15 people – crying secretaries from the operations office and Filipinos counting rosary beads and praying. It was oppressively hot and uncomfortable. Sand fell on Coalson's perspiration soaked shirt as rockets exploded nearby. Anticipating screaming hoards of NVA to come climbing over the airport fence at any minute, Baptist Coalson

[17] Velte interview.

[18] Green debrief; Liechty to Leary, July 14 and 19, 2004.

"wished that I had a few rosary beads myself."[19]

At 6.30 a.m. Velte called a meeting at Green's apartment in the USAID building. Although the situation was confusing, Velte decided that the time had come to evacuate the remaining fixed-wing aircraft. All pilots, fixed and rotary wing, should report to Tan Son Nhut at first light. At dawn, however, with shells still falling, the Vietnamese closed the airport to all but military traffic. An ominous sign of what might lie ahead came at 7 a.m. when a VNAF AC-119 gunship, attacking NVA positions near the airport, was brought down by a Strella shoulder-fired missile.[20]

As the enemy's fire on Tan Son Nhut eased, Air America was finally able to begin flying. Coalson made the first trip of the day, heading over to the USAID building at 9 a.m. to pick up a load of Air America pilots. The trip nearly ended in disaster. As soon as Coalson landed on the roof, at least nine people climbed on board. With a full load of fuel on his Bell 204B, he felt that he would not be able to take off vertically from the "postage stamp" pad. He shouted that someone had to get off. But no one answered. This was, Coalson pointed out, "the absolutely worst scenario: a full load of pilots – everyone is an expert." He asked again for someone to deplane. The response from the group was a rousing "It'll go!" – "Piece of cake!" Izzy Freedman then leaned over the console and assured Coalson that there was "no problem."[21]

The Bell would barely hover – 6 to 10 inches – at maximum power. But against 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 RPM. Coalson barely managed to avoid the rooftops below. "We almost lost the rotary-wing pilots on the first pickup," he recalled.

As other pilots continued to crew shuttle from downtown Saigon to the airport, Winston directed Coalson, now with copilot Victor Carpenter, to hover over to the DAO tennis courts to pick up some passengers for the *Blue Ridge*, command ship of the evacuation force that was standing off the coast. Coalson loaded the people on board, but refused to carry their souvenir ceramic elephants due to weight constraints. Making another marginal take off, he headed for the South China Sea. After an uneventful

[19] Coalson to Leary, July 26, 2004.

[20] Velte interview; Green debrief; Lavalle, Last Flight, p. 82.

[21] Coalson to Leary, July 26, 2004.

trip, Coalson landed on the *Blue Ridge's* small helipad, dropped his passengers, and asked for a hot refueling. At this point, Carpenter decided to call it quits for the day and unloaded his equipment. "I shut down the helicopter," Coalson reported, "and explained that nothing had happened yet and he should return to Saigon." Carpenter declined and walked off. Coalson's Filipino flight mechanic then unloaded his tools and announced that he was not going back either. "Now that really upset me," Coalson noted, "since I had great faith in our Filipino flight mechanics." But there was nothing he could do. Coalson refueled, returned to Saigon, and flew solo for the rest of his 10 hour and 30 minute flying–time day.

While Coalson was dealing with his crew's mutiny, Air America personnel were trying to prevent VNAF pilots from stealing the company's helicopters. Shortly before 10 a.m., Frank Andrews, maintenance superintendent for rotary wing aircraft, came running into Winston's office and reported that the Vietnamese from across the field were seizing helicopters at gunpoint. Winston instructed his pilots to get to any helicopter they could, take off, find a rooftop, and shut down. Operations manager Al Brau, fixed wing pilot Edward Adams, and several other employees then armed themselves in an effort to provide some security for the ramp. This stabilized the situation but not before VNAF pilots stole six helicopters, one of which crashed shortly after taking off.[22]

Shortly before 11 a.m., Ambassador Martin faced the inevitable and ordered the emergency evacuation of Saigon. He expected Marine Corps helicopters to fill the skies in short order. Unfortunately, a confusion in the command structure caused a series of delays. General Carey did not receive orders to execute FREQUENT WIND until 12.15 p.m. The marine security force then had to be shifted among the ships of the evacuation fleet. As a result, the first 12 CH-53s did not land at the DAO complex until 3 p.m.[23]

By 11.30 a.m., Air America's helicopters had been parked on rooftop HLZs around Saigon and were awaiting orders. Only a handful of fixed wing aircraft remained on the ramp at Tan Son Nhut. With armed VNAF personnel continuing to roam the Air America area, Velte decided to shift operations to a previously prepared location at the more secure DAO complex. As this transfer was in progress, fixed wing pilot Adams, armed with a M-16, continued his efforts to provide some security for the area.

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22 Andrews debrief; Winston debrief; Reid R. Chase to Leary, March 22, 1992.

23 Dunham and Quinlan, U.S. Marines, p. 179; Oscar Fitzgerald, "Interview with Vice Admiral George P. Steele, USN," December 22, 1975, Naval Historical Center, Washington, D.C.

Noticing a disturbance in the traffic building, which previously had been cleared of people, he went over to investigate. In an small hallway leading to the passenger lounge, he encountered a group of five armed Vietnamese soldiers. As the lead soldier began to raise his M-16, Adams "hit him as hard as I could at the point of his chin." The individual went down, and his comrades dragged him away as Adams held his M-16 on them. He was then able to bar the hallway door.

When Adams went back out to the ramp, he found that Velte and his group had left. He also began to feel the pain from a broken bone in his hand. Two fixed wing aircraft were still sitting on the ramp, a Volpar and a C-46. The C-46, which had 52 seats, was crammed with people, sitting in the aisles, toilet, and baggage area. He estimated that the number was closer to 152 than 52. Although the Volpar represented a lot more money than the C-46, Adams chose "people over price" and headed for the cockpit of the transport. He put a mechanic in the right seat – "for moral support" – and tried to start the engines. Cranking a cold C-46 can always be tricky, he noted, but starting one with a hand that had swollen up to the size of boxing glove "can be VERY tricky."

Fortunately, the engines turned over without a problem. Making a hard turn around the parked Volpar, he hit the airplane's vertical fin. There seemed to be no damage to the C-46, but he did not plan to stop and check. Proceeding through the burning airplanes and debris, he managed to reach runway 25 and begin his take off roll. "Drop flaps – suck it off early – gear up – accelerate – flaps up – climb power – breathe."[24]

As Adams was heading for Bangkok, Velte was learning that the plans for a secure fuel supply for the helicopters was falling apart. Fillipi had arranged for a 12,000-gallon tanker to be parked near the main DAO building. Sometime during the night of April 28-29, however, the fire marshal had ordered the tanker moved – but no one knew where. When a ground search of the area failed to turn it up, a helicopter was sent up to locate the vehicle. It was found in a small, locked lot near the Base Exchange Stop & Shop building. Maintenance supervisor Boyd D. Mesecher, who was on the helicopter, landed, broke the padlock, and hot-wired the tanker. It would not start because the battery was too weak. He returned to the main area in search of a vehicle with a battery large enough to use on the tanker, but had no luck. Returning to the tanker, he tried to use the battery from a nearby Izuzu bus, but it was dead. Without the

[24] Adams debrief.

tanker, Air America helicopters would have to refuel on the ships off shore. This meant that they would have only limited operating time in the Saigon area before making the nearly one hour round trip to the fleet for refueling.[25]

The situation did not look good. Of Air America's 28 helicopters, six had been stolen by the Vietnamese, one could not be flown due to rocket damage, one was out of service for an engine change, and four were conducting evacuations in Can Tho. And more bad news lay ahead.

David B. Kendall – known as "Farmer John" because of his rural background and fondness for wearing bib overalls when off duty – had ended up with Bell 205 N47000 on the morning of April 29. The helicopter, he found, lacked a main generator, had no working radio, and had oil streaks running down both front windshields. As his instruments had been in the green, he "went ahead and flew it." Kendall had made several pickups of Air America personnel when assistant rotary wing chief pilot Ed Reid told him to load up with passengers at the DAO and fly out to the *Blue* Ridge to refuel and have light maintenance done. By the time he reached the *Blue Ridge*, shortly before noon, the entire windshield was covered with hydraulic oil. As he landed on the ship's single helipad, the servos made "a growling sound," indicating very low hydraulic oil. Asked by the deck officer what he needed, Kendall said fuel and maintenance. He was told that there was no maintenance available. Also, he could not refuel because it would tie up the helipad. The only option was to ditch alongside the ship.

As Kendall voiced his objections, the deck crew removed the doors of the helicopter, tossed them over the side, and handed him a life jacket. He looked around to see if there was another ship that he could land on but none was in sight. As he did not have enough fuel to return to Saigon, "I decided to do as ordered by the deck officer." Kendall flew off the port side of the ship, pushed the controls of the Bell to the left, and jumped to the right at an altitude of 20 to 25 feet. His dramatic departure from the aircraft was filmed by a news crew on the *Blue Ridge* and received wide distribution.[26]

By early afternoon, Velte was down to 13 helicopters instead of the promised 25. Although evacuation instructions were confused, and the Marine Corps helicopters were nowhere in sight, he decided to press ahead with Air America's part of the plan. The 13 helicopters began shuttling

[25] Fillipi debrief; Mesecher debrief; Velte interview.

[26] Kendall debrief.

evacuees from Saigon rooftop HLZs to the DAO, anticipating the eventual arrival of the military helicopters to carry them to the fleet. When pilots reached 700 to 1,000 pounds of fuel remaining, they flew the evacuees directly to the ships, refueled, and returned to Saigon.

Most of the shuttles could be termed "routine," although there was nothing "routine" about the entire operation. Some missions were more "sporty" than others. At age 55, Chauncey J. Collard was surely the oldest helicopter pilot flying on April 29. A former navy lieutenant, he had been with Air America since 1965 and had survived the company's hazardous combat support operations in Laos. When the Air America pilots were grabbing helicopters before the Vietnamese could steal them, Collard had ended up with UH-1H 70-15866. He was not happy with this. The Huey was notoriously tail heavy and would shake violently at speeds over 90 knots. Several weeks before, Collard had spent two days trying to correct the center of gravity problem but without success. He would have liked another aircraft for the evacuation, but he was stuck with 866.

Compounding Collard's problems, he soon learned, was the loss of Air America's fuel – "a disaster." The Huey carried enough JP-4 for about 2:20 of flying. With the refueling point now 60 to 80 miles away in the South China Sea, he would be able to make only three to five trips from downtown Saigon to the DAO before he had to head out to the fleet for fuel. His shuttles went off without major incident until mid-afternoon, when he was directed to pick up four CIA men on the rooftop of a three-story house across the avenue from the downtown Catholic church. Not a designated HLZ, the house stood in a circle of other houses, all surrounded by tall trees. Also, there was a wall running around the roof where they waited. "As I was alone," Collard noted, "I had to be careful in clearing my left side and tail from the trees and wall."

Collard worked his way slowly to a landing. The CIA men came running out of stairway, yelling that there were armed, unfriendly, South Vietnamese on the floor below – and headed up the stairs behind them. Three of the men jumped into the back of the helicopter, but the fourth individual decided that he was going to ride in the left front seat. This would be a problem because earlier in the day Collard had moved the seat full forward to prevent anyone from sitting in it. The man was "in full panic." His eyes were huge, and he was sweating profusely. Dressed in a safari suit, Aussie bush hat, and carrying a CAR-15, he weighed over 300 pounds. Collard kept yelling at him to get in the back of the Huey, but he refused. "Somehow," Collard recalled in 1992, "he managed to get his gut and butt into the seat, and I damn near lost the controls while he knocked

them around doing it. I couldn't hit, or shoot him, as I had both hands full trying to hang on. When he finally sat down, I couldn't move the cyclic because his gut was against it. To this day, I don't remember climbing up through all those trees. That fat, panicky S.O.B. pulled the collective pitch control up under his arm and we were now at least 300 feet up, and fast losing turns on the main rotor. Meantime, I'm trying to stand on the collective to get it back from this bastard trying to kill us all. I'll never know how far we dropped RPM, but I finally got controls back."

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 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 Collard later in the day.[27]

At 3 p.m. the marine helicopters arrived. Twin-engine Sikorsky CH-53 Sea Stallions, capable of carrying 38 combat-loaded troops, began shuttling evacuees from the DAO complex to the fleet, while smaller 17-troop-capacity Boeing CH-46 Sea Knights made trips to the fleet from the courtyard of the embassy.

Air America helicopters continued their rooftop operations, assisted by the arrival around 4 p.m. of the four aircraft from Can Tho. At the request of O. B. Harnage, CIA air officer at the embassy, several helicopters were assigned to collect people from the Pittman Apartments at 22 Gia Long, residence of the CIA's assistant chief of station. The helipad at the Pittman occupied a tiny space atop the building's elevator shaft. It was difficult to reach from the rooftop, and Fillipi had had a study ladder built so that people could climb up to the helicopters. During one of these shuttles from the Pittman to the Embassy, UPI photographer Hugh Van Es caught a dramatic shot of Harnage leaning down to help people up the ladder to a helicopter flown by Robert Caron. This photo received worldwide distribution – and fame – although the captions often mislabeled the picture as one of a military helicopter atop the roof of the U.S. Embassy.[28]

Velte called off the rooftop evacuation as it grew dark, intending to resume operations the next day. The 17 Air America helicopters landed on the ships of the evacuation fleet in the early evening, with most of the aircraft ending up on the *U.S.S. Hancock*. Marine Corps helicopters contin-

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[27] Collard to Leary, March 7, 1992.

[28] Harnage, A Thousand Faces (Trafford Publishing, 2002); Fox Butterfield, "Getting It Wrong in a Photo," New York Times, April 23, 2000; "Leaving Saigon," People, May 1, 2000, p. 94; Caron to Leary, July 15, 2004.

ued the evacuation throughout the night and into the next morning. Ambassador Martin departed shortly before 5 a.m. on April 30. (Air America earlier had carried out his wife and their two dogs.) The last to leave – at 7.53 a.m. – was the Marine Corps detachment at the Embassy. Saigon fell to the North Vietnamese shortly thereafter.[29]

It had been the largest helicopter evacuation in history. Marine Corps helicopters, assisted by 10 U.S. Air Force helicopters, together with Air America, carried out 1,373 Americans and 5,595 people of other nationalities. Air America was credited with lifting over 1,000 people to safety. "That was no small accomplishment, to be sure," CIA analyst Frank Snepp observed, "particularly in view of the fact that the maximum capacity of each Huey was barely twelve people." But, as Air America Operations Manager Ralph Begien pointed out, the number should have been higher. "Air America did a good job," he wrote to his parents on May 5, "but we all wish the order to evacuate had come earlier as we would have been able to have brought out many more people than we did."[30]

Air America received little credit for its efforts. But this was not surprising, given the company's policy of avoiding publicity throughout the Vietnam War. Nonetheless, the helicopter pilots – supported by superb maintenance – had performed admirably in a challenging situation. Failure to provide security for the Air America ramp, Chief Pilot Winston pointed out, "compromised the entire operation." Also, lack of a safe alternative fuel supply prevented maximum use of the helicopters. Winston concluded: "This could have been a disaster." It succeeded only because of the skill and determination of the pilots. "As a group," Tony Coalson emphasized, "we were the best in the business." The company's pilots normally flew over 100 hours a month in difficult operational environments – and they had been doing it for years. The experience gained over the years paid off in March and April 1975. As Coalson noted, "We flew our aircraft to their limits and beyond – and we flew ourselves to our limits."[31]

Honors were passed out following the fall of Saigon. The Marine Corps Association named HMH-463 the helicopter squadron of the year for 1975, and Col. James Bolton, commander of HMH-462, as aviator of the year. On May 5, 1975, CIA Director William Colby cabled Velte:

[29] Dunham and Quinlan, U.S. Marines, p. 200; Philip G. Vaughn debrief on Mrs. Martin.

[30] Dunham and Quinlan, U.S. Marines, p. 202; Newsweek, May 12, 1975; Snepp, Decent Interval, p. 540; Begien to his parents, May 5, 1975, copy provided to author Leary by Cathy Begien.

[31] Winston debrief; Coalson to Leary, July 26, 2004.

"The withdrawal from Vietnam draws to a conclusion Air America's operational activities . . . Air America, appropriately named, has served its country well." But even this modest accolade was never heard by the pilots. The CIA would not publicly acknowledge its ownership of the airline for another year, and it would not issue a commendation to Air America's personnel until 2001.[32]

[32] Dunham and Quinlan, U.S. Marines, p. 202; Cable, Colby to Velte, May 5, 1975, Leary Collection; Central Intelligence Agency, "In Commemoration," June 2, 2001.

In Memoriam

George Jalonick IV

1940 - 2005

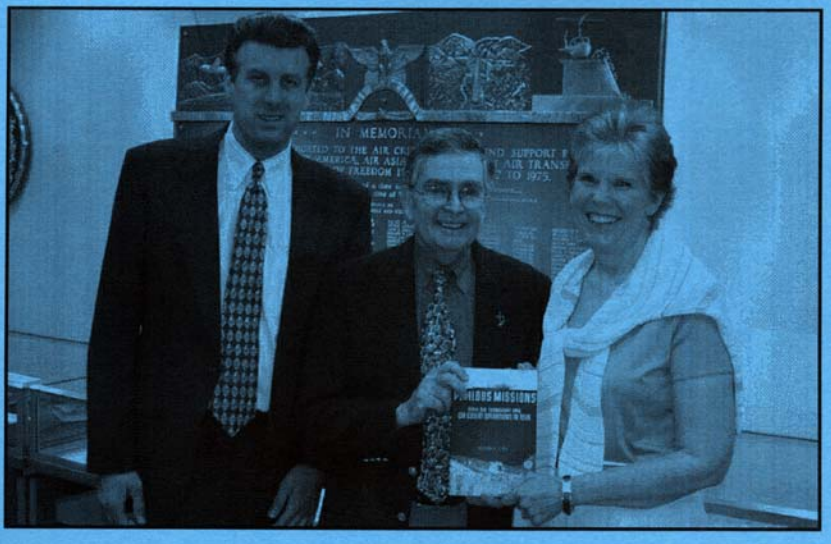
Those associated with the History of Aviation Collection and the McDermott Library at UTD were saddened during the summer at the untimely death of George Jalonick IV. He was a key figure in the establishment of this lecture series in the name of his parents, George Jalonick III and Dorothy Cockrell Jalonick.

George looked forward each year to the special scholarly presentations about aviation and seeing old friends at McDermott Library. As the lecture series continues he will be remembered as a special friend and generous supporter of The History of Aviation Collection.

Message from Erik D. Carlson, Ph.D. Coordinator of UTD Special Collections

As Coordinator of the History of Aviation Collection based in the McDermott Library at the University of Texas at Dallas, I want to express my gratitude to the Jalonick family for their support of this important lecture series. Though we missed the late George Jalonick IV at this year's presentation, we would like to believe that he would have been pleased at the quality of Dr. William Leary's lecture and the capacity audience. Appreciation also goes to Dr. Larry Sall, Dean of UTD Libraries, for his pioneering work in the History of Aviation Collection and continued support of its programs.

The 2005 lecture was aided tremendously by the work and dedication of the Special Collections staff - Carole Thomas, Paul Oelkrug, Thomas Allen, and Patrizia Nava. Support from friends of the History of Aviation Collection is also appreciated.



Distinguished speaker William M. Leary, Ph.D., center, presents one of his books to event sponsor Mary Jalonick, right, along with Erik D. Carlson, Ph.D., Coordinator of Special Collections in McDermott Library. The group is in front of the CAT/Air America Memorial.

William M. Leary, Ph.D.

William M. Leary, Ph.D., the E. Merton Coulter Professor of History, Emeritus, at the University of Georgia, is the world's foremost specialist on Air America. The 2005 lecture was central to the McDermott Library's Civil Air Transport-Air America Collection and Memorial located on the third floor of McDermott Library. Leary has written histories of the China National Aviation Corp., Civil Air Transport and the U.S. Air Mail Service.

In 1995 he received the Central Intelligence Agency Studies in Excellence Award for an Outstanding Contribution to the Literature of Intelligence. He served as the Charles A. Lindbergh Professor of Aerospace History at the National Air and Space Museum, Washington D.C. in 1996-97.

Among his many books are *Perilous Missions: Civil Air Transport and the CIA Covert Operations in Asia* and *The Central Intelligence Agency: History and Documents.* Civil Air Transport was the forerunner of Air America.

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