

Vietnam Evacuation: Operation FREQUENT WIND

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DATES: April 4–September 16, 1975

LOCATION: Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam)

OVERSEAS BASES USED: Tan Son Nhut Air Base (AB), Saigon, Vung Tau, South Vietnam; U-Tapao Royal Thailand Air Base (RTAB), Thailand; Clark AB, Philippines; Andersen Air Force Base (AFB), Guam; Wake Island

AIR FORCE ORGANIZATIONS:

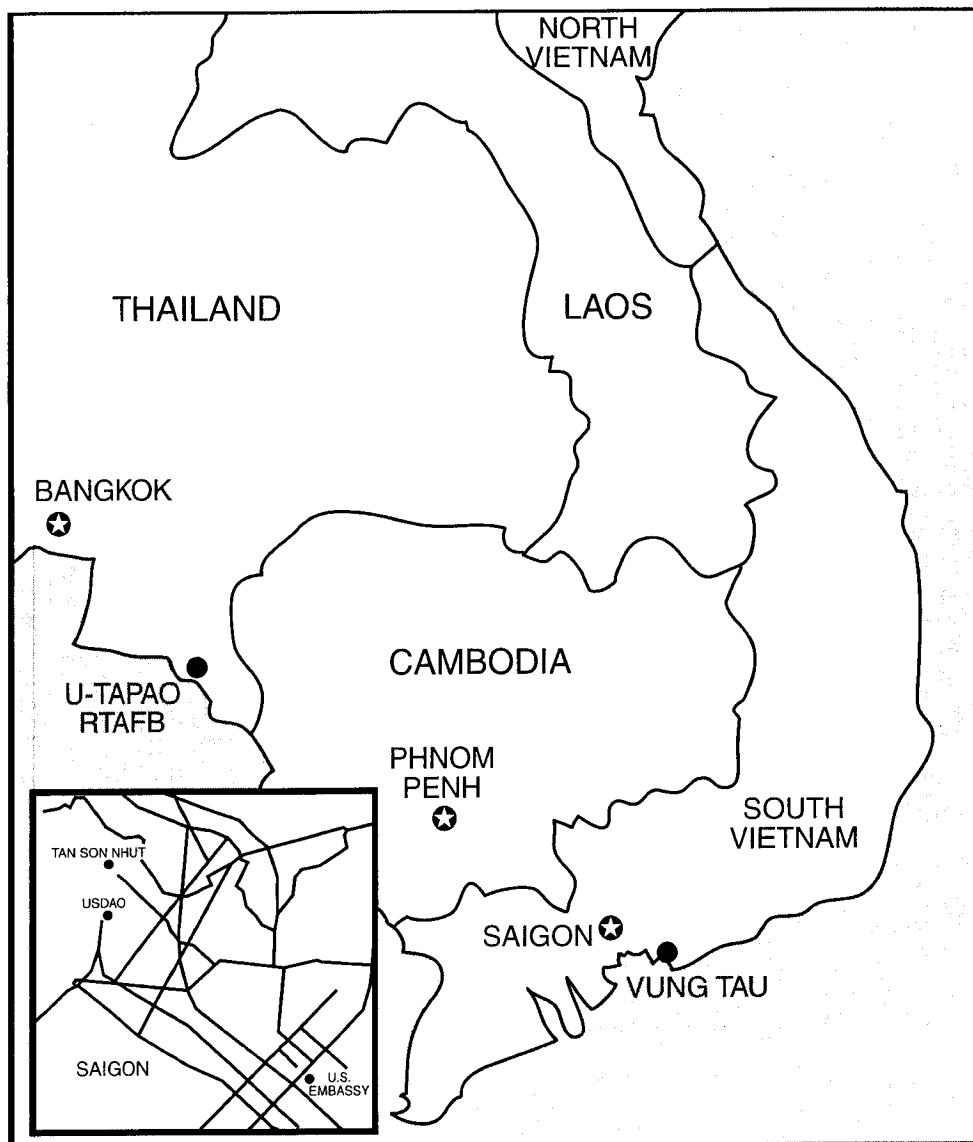
DIVISION:	WINGS: (con't.)
3d Air	436th Military Airlift
	437th Military Airlift
WINGS:	438th Military Airlift
3d Tactical Fighter	443d Military Airlift
18th Tactical Fighter	446th Military Airlift
22d Bombardment	514th Military Airlift
43d Strategic	
56th Special Operations	GROUPS:
60th Military Airlift	3d Aerospace Rescue and Recovery
62d Military Airlift	9th Aeromedical Evacuation
63d Military Airlift	
307th Strategic	SQUADRONS:
314th Tactical Airlift	16th Special Operations
374th Tactical Airlift	40th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery
388th Tactical Fighter	56th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery
432d Tactical Fighter	

AIR FORCE AIRCRAFT: A-7, AC-130, EC-130, HC-130, C-130, C-5, C-9, C-141, CH-53, HH-53, F-4

Operations

U.S. combat troops left the Republic of Vietnam in 1973 according to the terms of a peace agreement that temporarily

ended more than a decade of war. The fighting had ended for American forces, but the North Vietnam Communist government re-equipped its army and escalated the ground war in Vietnam. Meantime, the U.S. government continued aid to South Vietnam at a greatly reduced level. Consequently, several thousand U.S. citizens remained, many employees at the Defense Attaché Office (DAO) complex at Tan Son Nhut Airport, at the U.S. Embassy compound in downtown Saigon, or at four consulates at Da Nang, Nha Trang, Bien Hoa, and Can



Southeast Asia during the Vietnam Evacuation
Inset: Saigon during Operation FREQUENT WIND

Tho. Each of these sites retained a handful of U.S. Marine guards. In August 1974, Maj. Gen. Homer D. Smith, USA, assumed command of the DAO. He reported to Graham A. Martin, U.S. Ambassador to South Vietnam, and to Adm. Noel A. M. Gaylor, USN, Commander in Chief, Pacific Command.

Early in 1975, Communist military forces in Vietnam prepared for a major offensive. Such an offensive was not likely to provoke a powerful American military response, such as the one launched in 1972, because President Richard M. Nixon had resigned in 1974 in the wake of the Watergate scandal. The U.S. Congress showed little willingness to approve more aid for South Vietnam, much less a reintroduction of American forces into the conflict. During the first week in March, the North Vietnamese Army attacked key bases in the central highlands of South Vietnam. Ban Me Thuot, on the highway between Saigon and the north central highlands, fell on March 14, persuading South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu to withdraw his forces from Pleiku and Kontum. A chaotic retreat followed. By the end of the month, enemy forces had captured the strategic bases of Quang Tri, Hue, Tam Ky, and Da Nang, the last three on the northern coast.

The evacuation of Da Nang was chaotic. Communist forces had cut off land escape routes, leaving refugees and military forces alike dependent on sea lift or airlift. Ships evacuated thousands southward to other coastal bases. Commercial airlines under contract to evacuate American citizens were forced to carry panic-stricken Vietnamese soldiers and their families. The last airplane to depart, a World Airways 727, carried out 290 passengers, at least 7 in its wheel wells. The aircrew could not even retract the airliner's landing gear.

During the first week in April, other key South Vietnamese coastal bases, including Cam Ranh Bay and Nha Trang, fell to the North Vietnamese. Sea lift carried thousands more refugees to Vung Tau, on the coast just southeast of Saigon, and Phu Quoc Island. Although some South Vietnamese fully expected U.S. air strikes against the Communists, President Ford refused to order them. He did announce on April 3 that American military transports delivering military cargo to Saigon would on return flights to the United States evacuate Vietnamese orphans.



A USAF NCO gives food to a Vietnamese refugee family in Guam.

This operation, called BABYLIFT, began tragically. On April 4, a giant C-5 Galaxy, then the largest airplane type in the world, landed in Saigon with artillery for the South Vietnamese army. It took off with more than 200 orphans, escorted by 37 female DAO employees. Not long after taking off from Tan Son Nhut Airport, about the time it crossed the coast near Vung Tau, the C-5 suffered an explosive decompression in its rear cargo door area. Deprived of controls to the massive airplane's tail, Capt. Dennis Traynor, USAF, attempted to fly back to Saigon using the ailerons alone. Despite his best efforts, the huge airplane crash-landed in rice paddies short of Tan Son Nhut. Miraculously, 175 of the 330 aboard the C-5 survived the explosion and crash. Thus began the airlift evacuation of American citizens and Vietnamese refugees from Saigon.

Although sabotage was never proven, fear of it slowed the airlift from Saigon. The U.S. Air Force used no more C-5s and tightened luggage inspections. BABYLIFT was not a total failure.



MAC crew members cradle South Vietnamese infants during Operation BABYLIFT.

Other airplanes, including military transports and commercial airliners under contract, eventually evacuated more than 2,600 Vietnamese orphans to Hawaii and on to the continental United States.

A number of factors contributed to declining South Vietnamese morale during April. North Vietnamese forces continued to advance all across the country. On April 9, they attacked Xuan Loc, only thirty-eight miles from Saigon. That same week, Communist Khmer Rouge forces captured Phnom Penh, capital of neighboring Cambodia, and U.S. Marine Corps helicopters had to evacuate Americans there. If the trend continued, Saigon would also fall.

Ambassador Martin wanted to preserve an atmosphere of normality and calm in the South Vietnamese capital. He feared that a sudden massive American evacuation would lead to the kind of panic that had erupted in Da Nang, and he

wanted to prevent the collapse of the South Vietnamese government. During the first part of April, USAF C-141 Starlifters landed in Saigon with increased frequency to deliver military cargo to the South Vietnamese. Available to evacuate U.S. citizens, third country nationals, and selected Vietnamese, at first they carried only a small fraction of their passenger capacity. U.S. citizens with Vietnamese dependents refused to leave without them, and Vietnamese dependents faced time-consuming paperwork. They also wanted to take their extended families with them. Lines grew to a mile or more, and some people waited for more than twenty-four hours. C-141s often landed at Tan Son Nhut more frequently than they could take off because of time-consuming passenger processing and baggage checks. Consequently, at one time, four vulnerable Starlifters sat on the ground at Tan Son Nhut. By April 19, only about 6,000 evacuees had flown out of South Vietnam.

The fixed-wing evacuation went into high gear between April 20 and 28. Admiral Gaylor and Ambassador Martin simplified the paperwork that had delayed so many evacuees. President Ford authorized the evacuation of tens of thousands of "at risk" Vietnamese, even if they were not American dependents. In addition to the C-141s, USAF C-130s from the 374th Tactical Airlift Wing at Clark AB in the Philippines began flying to and from Saigon on April 21. The air evacuation became an around-the-clock operation, with about twenty C-141s taking off every day and about twenty C-130s every night. Neither airplane type was authorized to carry more than 100 passengers, but each one, in the later stages of the airlift, carried 180 or more.

There were other reasons for the accelerated aerial evacuation. By April 21, two-thirds of the country's land area and twenty-one of forty-four South Vietnamese provincial capitals were in enemy hands. The defenders of Xuan Loc began withdrawing to Saigon. The North Vietnamese Army cut the main highway between Saigon and Vung Tau and took crucial points along the Saigon River, precluding a massive sea lift. On April 21, President Thieu resigned, hoping new South Vietnamese leadership would persuade the Communists to negotiate. But North Vietnam was not in a mood for compromise. The Communists sensed total victory and hoped to occupy

Saigon completely by the time of Ho Chi Minh's birthday in May. The North Vietnamese publicly announced that they would not oppose an American aerial evacuation of Saigon but only if it took place immediately.

On April 22, more than 3,000 evacuees flew out of Saigon. There were more each day. On April 26 and 27, about 12,000 departed Tan Son Nhut on 46 C-130 and 28 C-141 flights. Two 374th Tactical Airlift Wing C-130s evacuated 250 dependents of South Vietnamese marines from Vung Tau on the 27th. Shortly afterwards, more C-130s entered the operation, having deployed from the 314th Tactical Airlift Wing in Arkansas to the Philippines. Maj. Robert S. Delligatti, USAF, and later Col. Earl E. Michler, USAF, of the Seventh Air Force supervised the airlift at Tan Son Nhut, working in the Evacuation Control Center at Tan Son Nhut. They collaborated with Col. Garvin McCurdy, USAF, DAO Air Attaché, and Brig. Gen. Richard T. Drury, USAF, Pacific Theater Airlift Manager. By the end of April, the DAO had processed over 40,000 people for aerial evacuation.

Initially, most evacuees flew to Clark AB in the Philippines, but on April 23, Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos an-



Americans and Vietnamese deplane from a C-130 after evacuation from Vietnam.

nounced that he would permit no more than 200 Vietnamese refugees in his country at a time. There were already more than 5,000 there. His new policy forced the U.S. Air Force to airlift refugees to Andersen AFB, Guam, and to Wake Island in the central Pacific, where the U.S. military services hastily constructed huge camps.

On April 27, enemy rockets hit Saigon for the first time in years. They set off a huge fire that left 5,000 people homeless. The attack ended the C-141 airlift because the Starlifters were more expensive and vulnerable than the C-130s and because they were needed for shuttling passengers from the Philippines to Guam and Wake. The C-130 airlift continued, but not for long. The next day, Communist pilots in captured A-37s bombed Tan Son Nhut, temporarily halting the Hercules evacuation after only 18 flights had carried out 3,500 people. Ambassador Martin hoped to use sixty C-130 flights to complete the aerial evacuation of Saigon on April 29, but Communist rockets frustrated his plans. A predawn artillery attack destroyed one C-130 and forced the last two to take off immediately, one with refugees and one with the burning C-130's crew. The runways also became full of evacuating South Vietnamese military aircraft and mobs of people demanding to be taken away. By dawn on April 29, the fixed-wing evacuation of Saigon was over.

Between April 1 and 29, the U.S. Air Force flew 201 C-141 and 174 C-130 sorties in the evacuation. Between April 5 and 29, these aircraft had airlifted more than 45,000 people from Saigon, including more than 5,600 U.S. citizens. Thousands of refugees and many U.S. citizens, including the ambassador, his staff, and many DAO members, remained in Saigon when the last C-130s departed. Fourteen North Vietnamese Army divisions armed with anti-aircraft weapons surrounded the city. At this point, President Ford ordered the final aerial evacuation of Saigon by helicopter, Operation FREQUENT WIND.

At dawn on April 29, a fleet of Air America UH-1 helicopters began shuttling evacuees from preselected Saigon rooftops to the DAO at Tan Son Nhut or to the American embassy. At the same time, a fleet of buses moved selected evacuees from predetermined Saigon assembly points to the DAO or to the embassy. Large Marine Corps CH-53 and CH-46 helicopters

gathered on ships of the Seventh Fleet off the Vietnamese coast to transport Marine Corps security forces to protect the DAO and embassy and to extract evacuees. Each CH-53 could carry as many as sixty-five passengers.

The U.S. Air Force played a key role in Operation FREQUENT WIND. Ten USAF CH-53 and HH-53 helicopters from the 56th Special Operations Wing and the 40th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron in Thailand had deployed earlier in the month to the USS *Midway* in the South China Sea. Operation FREQUENT WIND was the first major operation involving the use of USAF helicopters from an aircraft carrier. Nine flew with the Marine Corps helicopters to Saigon for the final aerial evacuation. Col. Loyd J. Anders Jr. commanded the USAF contingent. The U.S. Navy provided fighters from aircraft carriers as air cover for the helicopters, and the U.S. Air Force flew fighters and gunships, including F-4s, A-7s, and AC-130s, from bases in Thailand. Some of the F-4s attacked enemy antiaircraft artillery sites near the encircled capital. The Air Force also provided KC-135 tankers to refuel the fighters and C-130 airborne command and control aircraft to handle the air traffic.

Despite careful planning, Operation FREQUENT WIND did not proceed on schedule. Crowds of panic-stricken Vietnamese blocked bus routes in downtown Saigon and surrounded the embassy and DAO complex. South Vietnamese military forces at Tan Son Nhut demanded evacuation for themselves and their families. Enemy raids on the airport had knocked out the Air America helicopter refueling facility, forcing the UH-1s to fly all the way to the fleet to refuel. Many more refugees gathered at the U.S. Embassy than expected, and evacuation from that site did not begin until almost dark. There was confusion over scheduling with cover flights arriving in Saigon some three hours before the large helicopters from the fleet. Bad weather complicated an already confused operation.

During FREQUENT WIND, 71 American military helicopters flew 662 sorties between Saigon and elements of the Seventh Fleet. The operation succeeded in extracting more than 7,800 evacuees from the DAO and U.S. Embassy on April 29 and 30, not counting the U.S. Marines that had landed that day. On 4 round trips between the *Midway* and Saigon, USAF helicop-

ters evacuated more than 1,400 people. Counting fighter, tanker, and command and control flights, the U.S. forces flew a total of 1,422 sorties over Saigon the final day. The operation ended before 9:00 A.M. on April 30. Shortly after noon, Communist flags were flying from Saigon's Presidential Palace.

Although FREQUENT WIND, the final air evacuation of Vietnam, was over, the airlift of Vietnamese refugees to islands in the Pacific continued. Refugees congregated at Clark AB and the naval base at Subic Bay in the Philippines, Andersen AFB in Guam, and Wake Island. More than 400 Military Airlift Command (MAC) flights transported 8,556 tons of cargo to the refugee camps during the spring of 1975. Starlifters carried most of the supplies, including bedding, tents, and food. Of the camps, Guam was by far the most significant. MAC C-141s and C-130s made 135 flights to move at least 31,000 refugees from the Philippines to Guam. By mid-May, the island sheltered more than 50,000 Indochinese refugees.

In an operation called NEW ARRIVALS, MAC transports and commercial airliners transported tens of thousands of refugees from the Pacific island camps to refugee reception centers in the continental United States. The movement, which lasted through the end of summer, took about 600 flights. Refugees landed at one of several military bases that had been prepared for them, including Fort Chaffee, Arkansas; Camp Pendleton, California; and Eglin AFB, Florida. To reduce the refugee population on Guam, which became increasingly vulnerable as typhoon season approached, the Department of Defense opened a fourth reception center at Fort Indiantown Gap, Pennsylvania. In Operations NEW LIFE and NEW ARRIVALS, about 130,000 Indochinese refugees eventually settled in the United States.

Members of the armed services drew several lessons from the evacuation experience. Fragmented command and control hindered the operation, especially during FREQUENT WIND. A single military commander, and not the ambassador, should have controlled all military forces involved in the final phases of the evacuation. Not all participants in FREQUENT WIND agreed on scheduling, leading to confusion over the launch time of the large helicopters. A single agency should have defined the reference hour for execution. The definition of who

qualified for airlift evacuation kept changing, which routinely expanded the number of refugees to be evacuated. The Vietnamese evacuation demonstrated the value of a single theater airlift manager, the effectiveness of integrating strategic and tactical airlift resources, and the critical importance of adequate ground-support personnel to mission success.

The aerial evacuation of South Vietnam was the largest in history. More than 50,000 people fled by air, the majority on USAF aircraft. Almost all U.S. citizens left by air. Operation FREQUENT WIND ended more than twenty years of U.S. involvement in Vietnam.