

The Last Day
by Allen Cates
Saigon...April 1975

The calls for help continued but the right words were not said and it was obvious the caller had captured the radio. Darkness had set in and the North Vietnamese Army was overrunning Saigon. The situation was hopeless. An era spanning 30 years was ending. It was April 29th 1975.

The war in Laos ended a year earlier. Air America employees from Vientiane and Udorn scattered like leaves in a wind. Several transferred to Saigon where the work had always been routine compared to Laos, which was paramilitary in nature. It was still dangerous, but the military usually handled medical evacuations and rescues. That situation changed near the end and it soon became evident that business as usual would not continue.

During the height of the Vietnam War, the streets were filled with American military vehicles and soldiers. But now, almost all of the American troops had long since departed. It was obvious to everyone except the American Embassy that Saigon would fall. Buon Me Thuot had been overrun in March. Da Nang came soon after and then Nha Trang. For some reason, it appeared the American Ambassador believed that Saigon would be spared to remain a neutral enclave.

Denial

Meetings had been conducted a few days previously to pass on radio frequencies, locations of ships off the coast and to establish a contingency plan. U.S. Marine Corps General Carey told Air America representatives that Marines were supposed to be stationed at the Air America complex to protect the fuel depot at least 6 hours prior to any evacuation, but his hands were tied. The Ambassador refused to give approval until well into the afternoon. The Marines didn't show and the closest fuel was on the ships off the coast... a full 80 to 100 miles from Saigon. Fuel would prove to be a big problem on the last day. All the plans made previously were now scrapped.

The day before, on April 28th, ground fire from unknown sources had shot down several aircraft over Saigon. 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. Air America's helicopter crews remained to aid in the evacuation.

There were thirty-two designated helicopter pickup points on buildings. Six were for Air America. Ralph Begian worked in Air America's Flight Information Department. Just before the last day he and Nikki Fillippi, an Air America helicopter pilot, worked relentlessly to prepare pickup points in the city.

The Exodus no one believed would happen

But, every attempt to paint a large "H" on the tops of those buildings and to station fuel was thwarted by the American Ambassador, his staff and the Vietnamese police. The explanation received was that plans of this nature might provide the wrong signal to the Vietnamese public and cause panic. Air America's employees did their best to improvise and moved to a single building to maintain communications.

The Saigon exodus began with a rush. The largest airlift of refugees in the entire war started to unfold, ready or not.

One of the Air America pickup points was the Pittman Building in down town Saigon, where Hugh Van Es photographed the refugees climbing the ladder to the helicopter above. You

can't help but focus your attention on the man reaching his arm out to help. No one knows for sure who the helicopter crew was. They didn't know they were being photographed nor would they have cared. They'd been hauling food, ammunition, water; fresh troops in and wounded out--you name it... for years all through South East Asia. It was a snap shot in time; a glimpse that epitomized the very essence of what America was really all about.

Many years later the man you see holding his hand out wrote:

"We kept telling them we would come back. And then we didn't."

His name is O.B. Harnage. He was a CIA case officer and is now retired. I think that's what bothered most of us who worked there. We kept telling them we would come back and then we left and couldn't return. We never had closure.

Photo from: Corbis Images
Photographer: Hubert van Es.
Tragedy

Air America's several hundred Filipino employees were last on the list to get out of the city. Those with Vietnamese families were especially vulnerable.

Like the Koreans in Nha Trang, the Philippine Government stationed an LST off the coast of Saigon, but the Vietnamese police would not let them board. Over a thousand of them were stranded on the beach.

Marius Burke, an Air America Helicopter pilot, was able to convince Filipino Minister of Affairs, Mr. Sabolones, to bypass the dock and airlift them to the ship. They were able to evacuate over 600 people this way. The other 400 were evacuated by barge during the night. Air America tried to get its Vietnamese employees on the same ship and assistance was requested from the U.S. Embassy.

There was plenty of room and Mr. Sabolones gave his blessing, but the Embassy said no! They were afraid that ARVN soldiers would board. Cooperation was not received and many of Air America's Vietnamese employees were left behind.

Tragedies were as common as boards on a picket fence, but spontaneous heroics occurred as well.

On one occasion, Ralph Begian ended up hanging out of the helicopter with out 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.

Nikki and Ed Reid, another Lao helicopter pilot veteran, 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.

Miscommunications

The ships were supposed to know about Air America but a communication gap and their own problems created an emergency.

Many South Vietnamese helicopters headed out to sea hoping to land and escape the North Vietnamese. Groups of aircraft with no advanced warning and no radio communications were trying to land all at once. They paid no attention to standard flight patterns or landing protocol. Dangerous was not the word for it.

The Commander of the USS Blue Ridge took extreme measures to protect his ship and crew. He ordered the pilots of the helicopters to ditch at sea and had a small boat standing by to pick them up when they surfaced. He demanded the same for Air America crews, not knowing they were part of the evacuation.

Photographer Dave Routson
Adapting to a changing situation

The procedure called for the removal of the doors so the pilot could have an escape advantage. Chauncey Collard was then 55 years old and piloted everything the Navy had since 1936. Chauncey had been an Air America helicopter pilot for several years. He was about to experience a new adventure. 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 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.

Photograph Submitted By Scott Phillips
Coping with hysteria

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 through 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.

Air America Profile

Dave and Ruth Kendall and their kids, Bobby and Vicky, were well known in Air America. Originally from Hornbeak, Tennessee, Dave started with Air America in Saigon, transferred to Laos for several years and was now back in Saigon. He had two brightly colored shirts that he alternately wore with bib overalls when not flying.

Flying out of uniform was strictly forbidden, but Dave figured this last day was exceptional and the overalls seemed more comfortable. 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." 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.

Air America helicopter pilot Larry Stadulis 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 Air America who was carrying refugees.

Stretching the limit

Dave saw that Larry was going back and he climbed in with him. They shuttled back and forth the rest of the day.

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.

Epilog

Over 30 Air America flight crews stayed and flew the last day. One writer said the picture of the helicopter on the Pittman building signified America's failed policy. Echoing that opinion, many have felt that those who risked their life to save others did so only as a work ethic with no thought toward the plight of their fellow men. Others feel that all of us have a social responsibility and that values such as integrity and kindness are what make's America great and those values are inherently obvious during occasions when least expected. I take the latter view.

Life is not always fair, but one cannot abandon hope and leave consequences to those who are clever.

There were over three million casualties in the war in Vietnam and Laos. It would be difficult to justify the carnage that took place there. But, neither Air America, nor the other soldiers that fought there started that war . . . nor did we perpetuate it. Right, wrong or indifferent we did our job and often performed duties above and beyond their assigned task. Air America was non-combatant and their work was humanitarian, but we were still soldiers.

Joe Galloway, co-author of "We Were Soldiers Once...and Young" perhaps said it best when he wrote, "We Were Soldiers: That's the way it is, that's what we were. We put it simply, without swagger, without brag, in those three plain words. We speak them softly, just to ourselves, just for ourselves. If you can't hear those echoes, you weren't, if you can, you were."

Dave Kendall hired on with a helicopter outfit in Louisiana when he came back to the United States. On his days off he commuted to Tennessee where Ruth and the kids stayed. On a trip home, he was killed in an automobile accident. Years later, Ruth visited her sister in Chicago where they dined at a Vietnamese restaurant and conversed with the owner. She was very proud of her business and her successful children who were educated in America. Ruth said, "My husband used to work in Vietnam. He was a pilot for Air America."

The owner replied, "I was rescued from a rooftop in downtown Saigon on the last day. I will never forget the pilot. He didn't wear a uniform like the others. He had a colored shirt and overalls."

Tears welled in Ruth's eyes. "That was David," She said. The emotion was too much and they all broke down in tears.