

Air America Evacuation

By [Marius Burke](#), Air America helicopter pilot 63-75

During the weeks prior to the end I was deeply involved in preparations for a final evacuation. Among other things, was the setting up of roof top helipads and getting personnel to move into those high rise structures. This was to avoid the problems we incurred in Danang and Nha Trang where we tried to pluck folks out of the crowds. Didn't work very well. The concept was that we could buy some time by blocking the entrances to those buildings and pulling the people off the roof. Actually worked well. In the meantime the evacuation of "nonessential" personnel was being carried out by military and civilian a/c in Saigon. We had a large contingent of Filipino employees, most of whom had Vietnamese families who didn't have adequate papers, etc. They couldn't get out in the normal manner. The Philippines sent an LST to Vung Tau to take these people out (about 1,200). However, the Vietnamese wouldn't let them depart when they arrived at the dock. As a result, these folks were camped out in the open and we reached the point where the Filipinos refused to work and went to Vung Tau to be with their families. I flew down and met with the Philippine Ambassador to see what we could do about the situation and offered to fly them out to the ship, bypassing the docks. This was done the following day with all 1,200 being transferred. Obviously grateful, the Ambassador asked what they could do to repay us and I asked if they could take on some more passengers since we had a lot of Vietnamese employees that also were having trouble getting out. He said they could take 300 but they needed assurances from the U.S. Embassy that they would take responsibility for them when they got to Manila. Piece a cake, I thought. Called the Ambassador's Secretary, by the name of Jacobson and ran the scenario by him. His comment: "not only no, but hell no. I wouldn't touch that with a ten foot pole!" The reason to go into this detail is to set the scene and shed light on the mindset at the embassy.

Several trips were made to the Blue Ridge, (Command ship of the fleet) in the weeks leading up to the evacuation to coordinate responsibilities. The basic plan was for Air America to shuttle folks from downtown to the airport where the military would then further transport them to the ships. In meetings with Gen. Carey (the senior Marine on the Blue Ridge) he stated that 6 hours prior to any evacuation, the Marines would fly in and secure the airport and associated facilities in Saigon. About a week or so before the end I became concerned about fuel should something happen to our supplies at the airport. We found an abandoned high rise, removed access to the roof and I started shuttling drums of fuel. After

one trip I was informed to cease operations and I could be expected to be shot down if I went near that building. Subsequent discussions with Ambassador Martin enlightened me to the "fact" that he had inside information that Saigon was "off limits" to the N. Vietnamese and they would never enter the city. Therefore, my actions were unnecessarily upsetting folks and I was to desist. My suspicion is that Tom Polgar, who was CIA station chief and a Hungarian, had close ties with the head of the ICCS Hungarian delegation who in turn was feeding him misinformation which was then funneled to Martin.

On the 28th of April, I was in Vung Tau coordinating evacuation of orphans of Veterans at a military school. That evening I headed back to Saigon only to discover it was under air attack and any aircraft in the air was fair game. Headed back to Vung Tau but the weather had closed in so was forced to head out to sea and hope I had enough fuel to find a ship. Wound up on the Denver where I spent the night. Departed @ 0500 for VungTau to continue my previous work and was informed that the evacuation was starting out of Saigon. Landed on the Blue Ridge @ 0700 and met with Gen. Carey and asked why the Marines weren't in Saigon. His reply was that the Ambassador had not given him permission to come in. Believe they finally got there about 2PM!

In the meantime the Air America ramp was overrun; a number of our helicopters were commandeered by S. Vietnamese pilots and the fuel dump had been hit. We were able to make a couple of shuttles to the airport with evacuees and then had to take a load out to the ships which were about 100 miles away to refuel. This severely hampered our side of the operation. Had we had access to alternate fuel locations we could have done much more than we did.

I somehow missed the shut down instructions and my last trip into Saigon was well after dark. It was stangely quiet and it soon became obvious that I was the only aircraft in the air. Must have been a shutdown of air ops for some reason. Picked up a load of people and headed for the Blue Ridge. All the way out the controllers were singing our praises and saying what a great job we had done. Something positive for a change. After landing, was told to shut down. I had acquired a CAR15, grenade launcher, sawed off shotgun, two 9 MM pistols and loads of ammo with the thought that should things not work out at least I would leave in a blaze. The Marines took all the big weapons then threw them overboard. (still don't understand that). The pistols were to go to the armory where I could supposedly reclaim them at a later date. I then became cargo and was escorted to the bilges of the ship to join the rest of our folks. A day or so

later I was rescued by one of the ship's company to share his room for the rest of the trip to Manila.

A long way of answering your questions but feel the background info is pertinent. Ambassador Martin, based upon my interactions with him and other readings, impressed me as being a megalomaniac who was also probably getting senile. Because of his interference in our preparations for the evacuation, we wound up with no fueling capability in Saigon. I remember him telling me that what we were doing was unnecessarily upsetting the local population. The evacuation essentially started @ 5:00 AM but Martin held the Marines back until about 2PM, by which time we had lost a number of aircraft along with refueling capabilities. Once the Marines were released to do their job they did it in their normal outstanding manner. We were not arrested but relieved of our weapons (which was fine with me). The new 9MM pistols that the Embassy passed out that day were supposedly to be kept in the armory for release when we departed the ship. I offered them to the Commander who shared his room with me. When he went to check on them he was told they had been thrown overboard! Someone got two nice souvenirs. Other than that, given the conditions of overcrowding, etc., we were treated as well as could be expected and flew the a/c off the ship in Manila.

A couple of other points. I had made at least 3 trips to the Blue Ridge in the weeks preceding the evacuation to brief their folks on what our mission would be. However, when the day finally came it seemed they didn't quite know what to do. They ditched many of our a/c when there was certainly lots of room among the fleet for them. One of our Lao registered Bells that was commandeered by a Vietnamese pilot, landed on the Dubuque (an LST). Since it had no U.S. markings they threw it overboard. When I landed shortly after that, they realized that it belonged to us and felt badly about it. Fortunately, they had at least taken the avionics out and since my FM radio was not working, they gave me one. Bottom line...The Marines did a great job once they were released.(The hold up was on the part of the Ambassador, not the Navy) We were not arrested. The Navy did a pretty good job under the circumstances but panicked when so many a/c descended upon them. They also apparently did not communicate to all the ships what Air America's mission was. Not sure how many total hours were flown by Air America crews on that last day but I personally flew about 15.