The great helicopter rescue

This exclusive report from MURRAY BAILEY, who was lifted out of Saigon during the recent rescue operation, records in full, for the first time how this, the biggest helicopter civil rescue operation in history, was organised and carried out—and how some unexpected escapers joined in.

After much deliberation and three alerts, the order to evacuate from Saigon all US citizens, dependants, “third-country nationals” and those Vietnamese having a special relationship with US companies was given on April 29. The order came as a relief to many of the Marine Corps ground forces and helicopter pilots, who had been waiting off the coast near Saigon for nine days.

The runways at the city’s Tan Son Nhat airport were cratered so that only the Plan Four evacuation programme could be used. Plan One apparently covered evacuation by regular scheduled services; Plan Two evacuation by fixed-wing US military and civil aircraft; Plan Three evacuation by a mixture of aircraft and helicopters; and Plan Four evacuation by helicopters only.

Plan Four was Operation Frequent Wind, said to be the largest-ever helicopter evacuation, using 35 CH-53s, ten CH-46s, eight Cobras and one Huey, with another 50 on standby. They were based on about five ships from the US Seventh Fleet. Evacuees were landed on about seven major vessels and then distributed by launch among another 50 ships of the fleet.

All 35 CH-53s and five of the CH-46s were used for evacuation flights. Of the remaining five CH-46s, two were on medical standby, two were held in reserve for emergency actions and one was used for search-and-rescue. All eight Cobras served as escorts and later helped to guide the CH-53s and -46s to the two pick-up points. The single UH-1 acted as an airborne command post. It was felt that 54 aircraft was the optimum number, given the number of designated pick-up points and the expected “traffic density.”

Frequent Wind flights to Saigon were controlled from the USS Okinawa and return flights by an airborne C-130. The round-trip flight time was close to one hour and the CH-53s averaged about 50 evacuees, each of them carrying hand baggage only, per flight. The CH-46s averaged around 25 evacuees per flight.

Only a pair of two-pad pick-up points were used out of a possible total of 13. One of them was located at Tan Son Nhat airport, which had been hit by air force officers who had planned the flights at least a week before and used a fuel dump on an island close to the coast at Vung Tau as a pick-up point. About 70 army and air force helicopters were used in this manner to ferry out escaping South Vietnamese servicemen. Most of these were UH-1s but one CH-47 landed on the Okinawa carrying a number of air force pilots (and six motorcycles which were subsequently jettisoned). A Vietnamese major with his wife and three children arrived over the USS Midway in a Cessna, dropped a note on the deck saying he had one hour’s fuel left and duly made a perfect landing.

Most of the Vietnamese UH-1s came out after Saigon surrendered on April 30, and one of them narrowly missed the bridge of the Hancock while landing at night. Some had been stolen by air force officers who had planned the flights at least a week before and used a fuel dump on an island close to the coast at Vung Tau as a pick-up point. Another pilot took his helicopter home two days before the fall and then flew off to the fleet with his family. All Vietnamese, whatever their method of arrival, were treated equally once they arrived aboard ship.

The Vietnamese were not in radio contact with the ships and, having no foreknowledge of their position, had to find them by sight. Most of the fleeing helicopters came in batches; there were few single arrivals. Unidentified aircraft entered the area, some of them commercial airliners flying between Hong Kong and Bangkok on the new round-Vietnam route, which lay over the rescue ships cruising in a steady circle at about three knots.

On landing, some of the Vietnamese helicopters were forklifted overboard after being stripped of their equipment. However, during the evacuation operation was often not enough time for this and the helicopters were ditched immediately, mainly because the deck space was needed, but also for safety reasons. It had been rumoured that two Hueys had fallen into the hands of the Vietcong and any arms found on the occupants or in the helicopter were thrown overboard. In all, about 50 Vietnamese helicopters were pushed overboard.

A significant part was also played in the evacuation by a number of the Air America UH-1s on charter to the US Government.