

Memories of Operation Frequent Wind

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Background

Operation Frequent Wind was the final phase in the evacuation of American civilians and "at-risk" Vietnamese from Saigon, South Vietnam prior to the takeover of the city by the North Vietnamese Army (PAVN) in the Fall of Saigon. It was carried out on 29–30 April 1975, during the last days of the Vietnam War. More than 7,000 people were evacuated by helicopter from various points in Saigon.

USS Midway departed Yokosuka on March 31 to conduct air operations and visit the Philippines and Hong Kong. On April 18, the third day of a scheduled 10-day port-of-call in Subic Bay, Philippines, Midway was ordered to get underway and proceed to the coast of Vietnam at maximum speed.

Ten U.S. Air Force H-53 helicopters from the 56th Special Operations Wing flew aboard Midway April 20 to take part in Operation Frequent Wind, the evacuation of Vietnam.

On April 29, the evacuation commenced. The first H-53s departed Midway at 2:45 p.m. local time bound for landing zones in Saigon. Returning at 4:53 p.m., each helo carried about 60 passengers.

During the first day, 2,074 refugees were brought aboard Midway. While Air Force H-53s were bringing more evacuees aboard Midway, Navy and Marine Corps helicopters began transferring the early arrivals to other ships in the Seventh Fleet armada off Vietnam.

Over 1,000 of the evacuees spent the first night aboard the carrier.

By early morning of the second day of the evacuation, all U.S. military flights into Saigon had been completed. A steady flow of refugees continued, however, fleeing in Vietnamese aircraft.

In the early afternoon of April 30, a small Cessna O-1 "Bird Dog" light observation plane began to circle Midway. At first it was thought the pilot would try to ditch alongside the carrier. But then the tiny, single-engine aircraft flew over the ship and the pilot dropped a note saying that he had his wife and five children aboard and want to land aboard Midway.

On orders from USS Midway's Commanding Officer, Captain L. C. Chambers, flight deck crewmen quickly cleared the carrier's angle deck and prepared to recover the aircraft.

Despite a rain-soaked deck, the Bird Dog's pilot, a South Vietnamese Air Force major, made his first carrier landing a successful one.

The Bird Dog came to a stop well short of the end of the angle deck without benefit of a tail hook or barricade. The major and his family were met with wild applause from the crewmen as they exited the tiny plane.

Tens of thousands of Vietnamese evacuated themselves by sea or air. With the collapse of South Vietnam, numerous boats and ships, VNAF helicopters and some fixed-wing aircraft



sailed or flew out to the evacuation fleet. Helicopters began to clog ship decks and eventually, some were pushed overboard to allow others to land. Pilots of other helicopters were told to drop off their passengers and then take off and ditch in the sea, from where they would be rescued. During the fixed-wing evacuation 50,493 people (including 2,678 Vietnamese orphans) were evacuated from Tan Son Nhut In Operation Frequent Wind a total of 1,373 Americans and 5,595 Vietnamese and third-country nationals were evacuated by helicopter.[2]:258 The total number of Vietnamese evacuated by Frequent Wind or self-evacuated and ending up in the custody of the United States for processing as refugees to enter the United States totaled 138,869.

In two days of operations, a total of 3,073 evacuees were picked up by Midway. In addition to the Bird Dog, three Vietnamese CH-47 “Chinook” helicopters, 40 Vietnamese and five Air America “Hueys” found refuge aboard Midway.

The carrier’s medical team treated nearly 300 evacuees for minor illnesses and injuries. Most evacuees were found to be in good physical health.

Over 6,000 meals were served to the refugees aboard the ship during the course of Operation Frequent Wind.

The crewmen aboard USS Midway met the evacuees with compassionate understanding. The liberally gave of the time and attention, more than duty required. The kindnesses shown by the carrier’s crewmen were the evacuees’ first taste of American hospitality. It must have given them hope for the days to come.

Memory of AZC T. J. Talley, VA-115 September 1973 – October 1975

The following is my experience during Frequent Wind. It is important to recognize that I was a PO3 at the time and the following is from that perspective.

I was assigned as Shore Patrol on the evening of 30 March, 1975 while MIDWAY was pier side in Yokosuka, Japan. The detail was secured about 0500 on the morning of the 31st. As was the norm, I was allowed some rack time before mustering for work. At about 1200, I was awakened by a co-worker, AZ2 R.P., to report to Chief Rice. I do not believe that the ship was scheduled for departure on the 31st; I was surprised to find that we were underway. When I asked what had happened, I was only told that we were enroute to Okinawa. As we approached Okinawa the word was passed that MIDWAY would be picking up a contingent of Marine Corps Infantry. No further information was forthcoming.

Once in position off Okinawa the Marines were brought aboard by helicopter. The ship had insufficient berthing space for these additional personnel, so the Marines bivouacked on the hangar deck. They found space adjacent to and underneath aircraft and lived in that environment



until our arrival in Subic. As was the norm, the bulk of the Air Wing flew to NAS Cubi Point prior to our arrival. Once berthed at Alava Pier (Subic), the Marines offloaded onto trucks for boarding onto USS HANCOCK (berthed at Leyte Pier (Cubi). At no time do I recall being informed of Saigon's imminent fall. However, facing a ten-day Subic visit (which would be a "working in port"), I had previously requested leave for the in-port period. I had no prior indication that the ship might depart while I was in a leave status. Upon checking out with the Duty Office, I was informed by the Duty Officer (also the squadron Assistant Maintenance Officer) that, should I return and find my ship missing, orders would be waiting for me at Midway Hangar. I just replied, "Yes Sir" and off I went.

On the morning of our third day in Subic, AZ3 R.V. and I were having "breakfast" at Mom's. A LT from VF-161 entered and initiated cancellation of a squadron party. He looked over at us and asked whether we were MIDWAY. Being the fine, young, red-blooded American Bluejackets that we were, we gave a somewhat noncommittal "Maybe." He gave a small smile and said, "Well, if you are, you might want to consider getting back to the ship. We just went on 4-hour alert." R.V. had to get back to the ship and I had to gather my gear if I intended to finish my leave. While crossing the hangar-deck I was intercepted by AVCM Jim Spence, who looked at me and said, "I need you to check in from leave; R.P. isn't back and I need you to go to sea with us." I knew I was sunk but asked where R.P. was. It was revealed that he had asked for Special Liberty to go to Manila. He was told he could have the Special Liberty, but to remain local. He went to Manila, anyway. So, the first leave I had taken in 18 months came to an abrupt end.

MIDWAY had a problem with one of the boilers that delayed our departure. That was a very fortunate event for AZ2 R.P. as it gave him time to return from Manila, gather his things and report to the squadron at Cubi. It was unfortunate for me; by the time R.P. arrived my orders ashore to Midway Hangar had been changed. He had just enough time, barely, to gather his gear and get off the ship prior to departure. I could tell by his facial expression he was fully aware that he had just committed a major faux pas. However, off he went, and, in short order, we were underway.

VA-115 left the bulk of its aircraft and personnel at Cubi Point. The "detachment" that went to sea had one KA-6D and, as I remember, two bombers onboard – all stored on the hangar deck. There were sufficient personnel to handle those aircraft and no more. However, once at sea, an A-7 and F-4 were positioned for "alert" launches with ordnance loaded. I recall that these aircraft appeared as static displays would – just about everything each was capable of "putting on target" had been loaded. It was obvious that the ship was preparing for any potentiality. Still – we had no real inclination of what was developing. All we knew was that we were headed for the Gulf of Thailand to board the Air Force H-53s and that the bulk of ship's defenses were our three 5-inch guns.

Upon our arrival in the Gulf we found conditions to be calm and the water almost glassy. I remember saying that it looked like good water-skiing conditions, until one considered the "balls" of sea snakes we had seen during approach. The first H-53 arrived and had a difficult time landing on our slowly moving deck. After several attempts, the decision was made to go dead in the water to accommodate the recovery. I recall that it took longer than it should have. Just as a sidebar, I later sat across from an Air Force crewman on the mess decks. He took one bite, dropped his fork, looked up and said, "How can you guys eat this crap?" I informed him that this was one of the better meals we'd eaten in a while – stick around and you'll learn what

“bad” really is. He looked at me in disgust, arose, dumped his tray into the garbage, and delivered his tray to the scullery. I suspect he lived on “gedunk” for the duration of his stay.

As the ship approached its designated position off Saigon, scuttlebutt spread that we were being shadowed by as many as three North Vietnamese gunboats. No one really doubted this was true, although I know of no one who put eyes on such. It was enough to cause an increase in tension, though. It was a weird environment, knowing that our response to an attack was severely restricted. However, aside from that thought floating in the back of our minds, the daily routine was one of boredom. We conducted no flight operations so there was just routine daily inspections and then – wait. We arrived on station and continued to wait. Many of the crew had taken to strolling the flight deck and enjoying the sunshine that so many rarely saw while underway. I, too, took those daily strolls – I enjoyed looking at the H-53s with their door guns.

On April 29th, the sky filled with helicopters. We now knew that the Republic of Vietnam was in its death throes. Some of the first to arrive were silver Air America H-1s. These were parked adjacent to the island; no Air America assets were pushed over the side. Everything else that arrived was, indeed, pushed over the side. Ready Room Five had the Pilot Landing Aide Television system (PLAT) on the television and the controllers’ voice contacts with incoming helicopters could be heard. One RVNAF H-46, with a Colonel at the stick, was told several times “We are an aircraft carrier” until one of the controllers thought to ask “Do you know what an aircraft carrier is?” The reply was “Oh, sure”. This same H-46 ran out of fuel trying to find us, finally making a water landing just off our port side. All souls were retrieved but “Oh, sure” became a running joke. Conversely, the O-1 Bird Dog landing was a masterful stroke of airmanship.

In the midst of it all, VA-115 was directed to vacate the upper berthing for use by “refugees.” These refugees were U.S. diplomatic personnel and media representatives, including family members. One was the historian Max Hastings (reference his latest work Vietnam: An Epic Tragedy, 1945-1975). Given the tone of his work on Vietnam one would think he would have been more gracious in his assessment of the war and his rescue, but that’s for another time. Quite honestly, it appeared to us (enlisted crew) that some of the “refugees” brought out not only wives, but also girlfriends as some seemed to have a little too much of the “bar girl” appearance about them. Once shown to the berthing area, one of the women declared the space “barbaric” and proclaimed she could not nor would not “live like this.” We were reduced to “hot racking” and these people only complained. It did not generate much sympathy or empathy for these “refugees.” To his great credit, the ship’s X.O. was onsite when the declaration of “barbaric” was made. He informed the individual that this was the best the ship could do under the circumstances and, if it was truly unacceptable, he would be more than happy to put her back on a helicopter and send her back from whence she came. Unsurprisingly, there were no more complaints.

Conversely, the Vietnamese refugees exhibited only gratitude. These folks were relegated to sleeping on bubble wrap on the hangar deck, with everything they owned (which wasn’t much – only what they could carry out) adjacent to them. The children really tugged at the heart strings. They had nothing but a smile. MIDWAY’s crew responded admirably. We had been unable to replenish at sea so the ship’s store was fairly sparse. What remained was purchased and distributed to the hangar deck refugees. When the ship’s store ran dry, sailors raided their own lockers. If something looked remotely useful, it was given to a Vietnamese. Their gratitude ran wholly opposite to the response from our “countrymen.” It was during this period that word circulated that the ship was down to 4 or 5 days rations. The ship’s cooks did a

tremendous job with what they had. That experience ended any “bad mouthing” of Navy cooks and their abilities, at least on my part.

One individual deserves some recognition for his efforts. AN Robert Bertelli (known as Bert in those days) took it upon himself to help alleviate children’s boredom. Having been assigned to Maintenance Control to operate the Visual Information Display System (VIDS) for managing aircraft discrepancies, he had become familiar with the ditto machine. He drew Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck on ditto mats and obtained permission to expend some copy paper. He made all the copies he could, scrounged colored pencils and markers from everyone he encountered, and then recruited me and a couple of others to help distribute these to the children on the hangar deck. He just wanted to provide a small distraction from the turmoil. Those kids just beamed. I came away from it wishing there was more I could do. And – we never found a loose Mickey or Donald anywhere; those kids hung on to those copies like they were made of gold. Some of their parents were visibly moved by such a seemingly small gesture.

Once the last helicopter departed Vietnamese airspace and landed, we were directed back to the Gulf of Thailand to (1) return the H-53s to Utapao and (2) take custody of RVNAF F-5s and A-37s. As I recall, the bulk of these had been flown out of South Vietnam during the scramble to get out. Air Force H-53s airlifted these to us; several experienced broken slings. I recall two that were dropped on the flight deck; another broke free inbound to the ship just off the fantail. With a couple of others, I was on the fantail watching when the sling broke. Given our angle of view, it appeared that trajectory was bringing the F-5 directly to us. We broke and ran expecting the aircraft to hit just behind us. Upon hearing the aircraft hit the water, we returned in time to watch it sink. The flight deck was quite full of intact and “splattered” aircraft. As I recall, this event took all of 4 days.

It was while in the Gulf of Thailand even a blind man could see the large junk that was obviously in distress. It was crowded – probably overcrowded – with refugees. A high number were women and children. Yet – we just watched as the junk very slowly sank. Watching from a catwalk, I asked one of the squadron officers whether we were going to intercede or just watch them sink. He replied that we needed State Department permission. In my youthful ignorance I asked what State has to do with – we’re Defense! I received a short lesson in diplomatic work and could only express my opinion - “That’s stupid.” He agreed but wait for State we must. Just about the time the junk was about to sink more than float, the whale boats were directed to recover the refugees. Just in time, too – the junk went down shortly after the last load was enroute to us. I haven’t had much use for politicians or diplomats since.

Upon completion of loading the F-5s and A-37s we were notified that our next stop was Subic Bay. It was intended to off load these aircraft there. Then, it was announced that we would not be going to Subic. The Marcos government denied permission to do so. Apparently the Philippine government’s hands were full with the arrival of the RVN Navy (such as it was). I learned, much later, that our allies were unsure about American commitments given recent events. They had to live in the region; we did not. So, instead of Subic, we were directed to the Naval Station at Apra Harbor, Guam. We were told to expect being in Guam for about 5 days and – oh, joy – there would be liberty. Just before our arrival, however we were informed there would be no liberty; only personnel who had family members on Guam would be allowed ashore. There was one individual in the squadron who fit that profile; an AMH1 QAR whose wife was Guamanian and she and their son were living with her family while he was assigned to VA-115. As a sidebar, I reported to VQ-1 (NAS Agana) in November 1975. It was then that I

learned the Guam Chamber of Commerce interceded with COMNAVMARIANAS to severely limit MIDWAY's liberty. They expressed fears of what condition MIDWAY's sailors might leave Guam. After seeing Guam, I decided that was probably a prudent decision.

Surprisingly, working around the clock, the off load only took about 36 hours. Underway again and headed for Subic. We should have known better. CTF-77 decided that since the air wing had been ashore for so long, it would be prudent to carrier qualify pilots and bomb some rocks. Morale plummeted. Aircraft began arriving, along with a few additional maintenance personnel, and we were back to the routine of cyclic operations and practice bombing. Fights broke out on the flight deck over things that normally would have been laughed at or ignored. Then – the Mayaguez capture was announced. We were going to convince the Cambodians of the error of their ways. Morale greatly improved. But – once in range it was all over. More cyclic operations and practice bombing. It was about two more weeks before we saw any port – finally it was Subic, for 3 days.

Those of us who had been with the ship during the entire time were excused from duty. I wish I could tell you what I did those three days but, unsurprisingly, it's all a bit fuzzy. All except the last night in Subic. I was walking down Rizal Avenue, at night, when I heard footsteps running up behind me. Being no stranger to the PI I assumed I knew what this was and turned with a fist cocked to floor whoever thought I might be an easy target. It was then I heard "Whoa, it's me, it's me". It was AZ2 R.P. – I almost knocked him down anyway. As it was, I got deep into his wallet that night. It didn't make things right – but it helped – a little. He carried that one for a long time so I suppose I should be more forgiving. Maybe one day I will be.

Once it was all over things seemed to slip into a funk. Morale was low as the ignominy of the evacuations left a bad taste. The recurring theme was that we had not lost; the politicians did. We were all convinced that one carrier, let alone the three available (MIDWAY, CORAL SEA and ENTERPRISE) could have stopped the North Vietnamese Army's drive on Saigon cold. Yet – we had experienced a Presidential resignation, had a President no one voted for, and a Congress that wanted no more. So much blood and treasure wasted – and that's the sticking point – it was all wasted. We all know people on the Wall and, some of us at least, still have a degree of bitterness.

Memory of Hugh Replogle, VA-115 March 1975 – June 1976

I was aboard the Midway during the days she participated in the evacuation of Saigon.

All our planes had been flown to Cubi and naturally only those crews were not aboard. I was the maintenance officer and I stayed aboard - - - - (and that's another story !). Anyway, I spent almost the entire day on the O-3 level just behind Pri-Fly watching the amazing events unfolding.

There was one little drama that I observed that remains with me like a carved crystal in the shadows of my mind. As you well know the airspace around Midway was a constant swarm of flying machines of all kinds all wanting to land and that is a whole story in itself. But the one little incident I will always remember was when an obviously "Air America" Huey managed to squeeze itself onto a landing spot aft and a little right of centerline in the Fly-3 area.

For me, the whole thing was of course silent pantomime due to the general noise level. The bird shut down and I think about 3 or four guys got out; all of them obviously nonmilitary as they were attired in khaki shorts, blue jeans, fatigue trousers, T-shirts, oxford button-down collar. Hawaiian design sport shirt, etc. . . . you get the drift. A couple of the ship's Marines (with

weapons ready) stopped them and had them hand over all their sidearms (all handguns from shoulder holsters). They gave their weapons to one of the Marines and the Marines started to escort them to the area in back of the island where the deck firefighters park "Tilly," the crane, and the fire truck. One man held back a bit and headed for the Huey. Just as the "straggler" was turning around from the HUEY's cargo compartment with a wooden box in his hands, about the size of a case of beer but twice as tall, one of the Marines observed the move and was on him in an instant with his rifle up and ready. The Marine means business. The Marine backs up 2 or 3 paces and directs his "custody-man" to advance toward him 2 paces and to put the case down on the deck. There is obviously a couple of verbal exchanges and the Marine backs the dude up one pace and inspects the box. He then proceeds to lift up what appears to be a bottle of Champaign! The Marine tapped the box with his boot and motioned the Hawaiian-shirt dude to join the rest of the group. The Marine watches to see that his partner has the straggler in the group and under supervision.

The Marine investigates the the box again and there are more bottles. The Marine then holsters his weapon, picks up the case and walks over to the side of the ship and drops the case overboard into the ocean!

God, I love Marines.

Memory of Jerry "Dark Red" Maroon, VA-115

As a young Lt in VA 115, I was aboard CV41 during the operation. My roomie at the time was Lt (later RADM) Steve "Mount" Baker who stayed back in Cubi. With a vacant bunk, a young AF First Lt H53 driver was assigned to my state room (Black Door with eagle painted on it).

The entire operation was extremely well-planned but had a very ominous beginning. After the first H-53s landed a few days before the evacuation, the Air Boss told them to fold blades. Oops, that's when everyone realized Air Force H53 blades unlike Navy models did not fold. It only took 5 to clobber both cats and the landing area. Boss, Handler, and Hanger Deck realized they would have to put some below which was no easy feat for those large aircraft. It got done and after a few days of improvised CQ for the AF pilots, the operation went off like clockwork. As an aside, Midway later went around and picked up a slew of F-5s, more helicopters and even an A-37 off Thailand and transported them to Guam to off load. Pretty amazing accomplishments all-in-all. The efforts of Midway and others was pretty amazing. Sad note: we missed a lot of good liberty in Cubi. 😊.

Memory of Lieutenant Fred Block, VA-115

I was on board for the evacuation. It was quite an event. Lots of helos, the ship kept some support aircraft in the hanger in case they needed some air cover, but I don't believe any were launched. I did take an 8mm of the bird dog landing and all those kids getting out of it. That was amazing. I believe that film was converted and donated to the Midway museum. The ship had to shove several Hueys over the side just to make room on the flight deck. One little lady fainted on the deck getting out of one of the Jolly Greens, her dress had a lot of gold sewed into it and she fainted due to the heat and the weight. A lot of drugs got thrown overboard as well; it seems the people leaving were trying to take anything of value. A few days later we sat off Thailand and loaded F-5's that were still in boxes and took them to Guam to offload. That was interesting, Joly Greens (CH-53s helicopters) ferrying these boxes and dropping them on the deck. I don't know how many we had, but the deck was covered. The

O-1 Bird Dog that had landed with a South Vietnamese Air Force pilot and his family was tied on the outside of the island to salvage it. Bos 'mates were working overtime. It was an interesting few days for sure. It was difficult to take photos as the photo cops were everywhere taking your film. However, I got the 8mm and some other shots as well.