

VIETNAM

# Operation Frequent Wind

## The Evacuation of the DAO Compound And the Saigon Embassy

By Michael L. Kelley



LCpl Darwin Judge



LCpl Charles McMahon

In the darkness before dawn on 29 April 1975, two young Marines stood guard outside the United States Defense Attaché Office (DAO) compound at Tan Son Nhut Air Base in Saigon, Republic of South Vietnam. They were to provide security and assist in the evacuation of refugees from the besieged capital.

A few miles away, elements of General Van Tien Dung's North Vietnamese Army had advanced on the city and were about to overrun the air base. Communist forces had invaded the Central Highlands, rolling back the Army of the Republic of Vietnam in its path. Panic and terror caused hundreds of thousands of refugees and soldiers to flee from Pleiku, Hue and Da Nang, seeking safety in Saigon.

Lance Corporal Darwin Judge, a handsome young man from Marshalltown, Iowa, was an Eagle Scout, and he loved to ride his motorcycle with his friends. He was a good kid. Corporal Charles McMahon from Woburn, Mass., was active in the Boys & Girls Club after school and in 1971 had been selected Boy of the Year by the Woburn Boys & Girls Club.

The two Marines were part of a 16-man security guard deployed by Major James H. Kean, Commanding Officer, Company C, Marine Security Guard (MSG) Battalion. They found themselves outside the security of the embassy gates, standing guard in the dark, as North Vietnamese forces advanced toward the air base. Kean had arrived at the embassy from his company headquarters to assist his Marine security guards as the deteriorating situation worsened.

A world away, President Gerald Ford met with his staff and military advisors, planning the evacuation of Americans from Saigon. In dispatches to U.S. Ambassador Graham Martin in Saigon, the President requested a rapid evacuation before the enemy closed in on the city. However, Martin was more concerned with keeping the situation stable and not panicking the Vietnamese into outright anarchy.

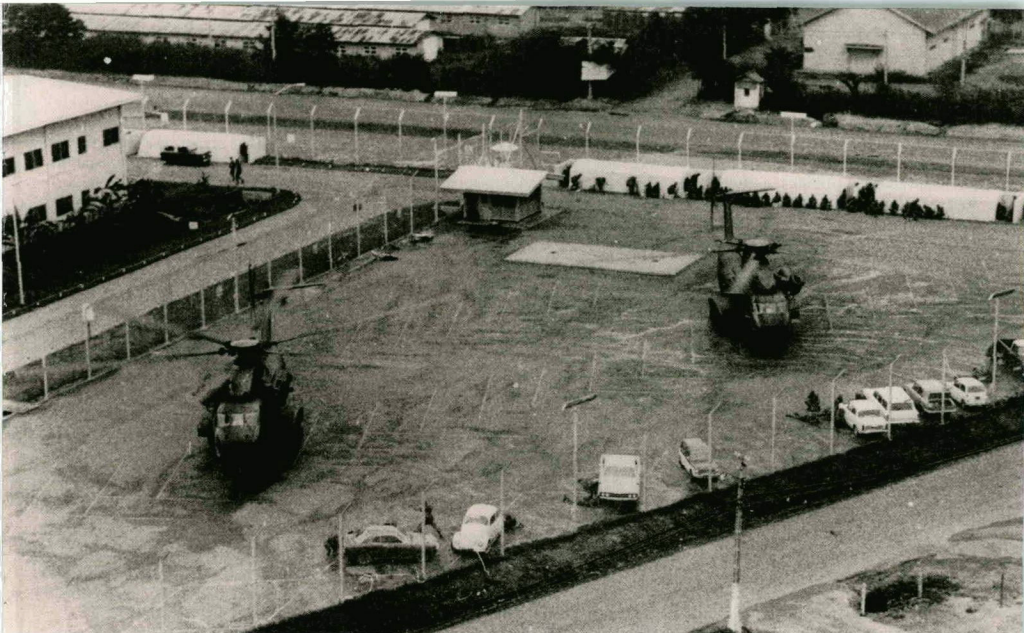
As it was, ARVN soldiers and police, armed with rifles and pistols, who were capable of taking revenge against Americans, roamed the streets. Sporadic gunfire filled the air around the city, and chaos was around every corner. A sense of doom prevailed over all of Saigon.

The American Embassy was using the DAO compound as its main point of departure. All Americans and refugees who reported to the embassy were to be sent by bus to the DAO compound and processed for a flight. The North Vietnamese soon forced an end to the ambassador's plan. As the Marines stood guard, the North Vietnamese began a barrage of rocket, mortar and artillery fire, putting everyone located at the DAO compound at risk. Hundreds of evacuees and refugees at the facility were being processed for flights out of the country by chartered airlines. The runways were torn up by the enemy's direct hits, rendering them useless to fixed-wing aircraft.

Sergeant Kevin M. Maloney, the Sergeant of the Guard at the DAO compound, had three young Marines on his detail the night of 29 April. They had been in Vietnam for only a few weeks. Maloney posted Cpl McMahon and LCpl Judge to Post 1 at the outer gate. He then posted Cpl Otis Holmes to the inner gate, Post 2. As he headed to his sleeping quarters, Maloney could hear them chat across the 30 yards that separated them. "I did not know that the two young Marines on Post 1 would never live to see the sun rise," Maloney said.

Holmes recorded: "Just before 0330, we had been talking about back home and the girls we liked. Suddenly, the quiet night exploded with the sound of incoming enemy fire. I saw a 122 mm rocket hit the ground next to Post Number 1—a direct hit. The second rocket exploded next to my post, the blast throwing me into the air like a rag doll. I shot the lights out over Post Number 1."

When Sgt Maloney heard the explosions, he scrambled outside with his rifle.



Two Marine CH-53 Sea Stallion helicopters (above) sit down on an improvised LZ in a parking lot during Operation Frequent Wind. Americans, Vietnamese and members of the press (below, left and right) were lifted out of the DAO compound before the NVA actions forced closure of the LZ there. (Photo by GySgt D. L. Shearer)



COURTESY OF JAMES BURNETT, USMC

"I ran to Post Number 2 and found Corporal Holmes wounded from enemy fire. He appeared to still be in fighting condition, despite his wounds. I asked him what happened. He told me that a rocket hit Post Number 1. We began to move towards Post Number 1 in search of Judge and McMahon. It was very dark and difficult to see. I told Holmes to search the ditch on the left side of the road, and I would check the ditch on the right side."

Holmes said: "I was searching along the ditch in the darkness and came across McMahon's body near Post Number 1. I knew right away McMahon had been killed."

Sgt Maloney recalled his search. "We

looked along the road and found Judge's body laying near some burning Honda motorcycles. I dragged him away from the flames." Holmes was showing signs of shock, and Maloney sent him to the rear to get medical care.

Maloney remembered how a Vietnamese ambulance crew arrived to collect the bodies. "I did not realize it at the time, but I, too, was suffering from shock, and I was of no help to the ambulance crew. The warm, sticky tropical air was heavy with the stench of cordite and death. I was sick. I asked myself, *Why them and not me?* I prayed."

At 0430, Maj Kean received a report that two of his Marines had been killed

and one wounded. Those two young Marines would be the last two Americans killed in action in the Vietnam War. Kean knew that the situation was very dangerous at the DAO compound. His Marines were under direct fire from the communist gunners on the perimeter of the air base.

During that time Sgt Maloney, still at the DAO compound, said: "While I was on security detail, two U.S. Air Force C-130 transports arrived to pick up evacuees. NVA gunners began to fire 122 mm rockets, and one aircraft took a direct hit, exploding in flames. The crew was able to escape before the aircraft was engulfed in fire. They were picked up and evacuated by the second C-130 transport."

"Out along the perimeter of the base, I saw a lone South Vietnamese Air Force C-119 gunship laying down a heavy volume of fire onto the NVA gunners who were firing the rockets at us. Suddenly, the communist fired a ground-to-air missile at the gunship, striking the wing, and it began to fall to the earth in flames. An airman tried to parachute out of the back of the plane, but he did not make it out safely. These were very brave airmen."

Sgt Ted Murray, one of the members of the detail sent by Maj Kean to the DAO compound, recalled his experience. "After we lost Judge and McMahon in the rocket attack, we knew the end was near. The NVA began pounding the air base with heavy artillery fire. I asked my [gunnery] sergeant, Vasco Martin, if the bodies of Judge and McMahon had been recovered from the hospital. He told me that Major Kean received a report that the bodies had been moved out to the ships off the coast. I had volunteered to recover them.

"We were all exhausted from lack of sleep, little food, stress from hostile fire and very long hours of security duty in the extreme heat. We had helped with the evacuation of thousands of people in a professional and efficient manner without chaos under hostile fire."

Major General Homer D. Smith Jr., USA, the defense attaché in Saigon, advised Ambassador Martin that the air base was badly damaged and could no longer support the landings of fixed-wing

aircraft. The deaths of Judge and McMahon and the fact that the Marines at the DAO compound were under direct fire from NVA gunners made the President decide it was time to go. Not wanting more Americans killed or injured, he ordered the ambassador to commence Operation Frequent Wind, the evacuation of Saigon.

**A**t 1048 on 29 April, Ambassador Martin approved the orders for the emergency evacuation by helicopters of all Americans, third-country nationals and selected South Vietnamese. Timing was critical. The Navy and Marine Corps had spent many weeks planning to set the complex operation into motion. The only thing not factored in was the disposition of the two Marines, Judge and McMahon. Maj Kean had instructed his noncommissioned officer in charge to ensure the proper disposition of his two dead Marines before the evacuation was completed.

It was reported that their bodies had been taken by the ambulance to the Seventh Day Adventist hospital morgue near the air base. With time running out and the evacuation kicking into high gear, Maj Kean had his hands full directing all of the things needed to get the ambassador and his Marines safely out of Saigon.

By midday, the situation at the American Embassy was pandemonium. Kean had to act quickly. He called for the Marine helicopters offshore to pick up the

evacuees in Saigon. The helicopters would have to go to the embassy and the DAO compound to evacuate everyone quickly.

While his Marines guarded the walls and gates, Kean organized a group of resident Navy Seabees and embassy staff to cut down trees and shrubs around the embassy compound to enable the landing of helicopters. They painted the embassy roof and the parking lot with luminous paint. The roof would be used for the smaller CH-46 helicopters, while the parking lot and compound would be used by the larger CH-53 helicopters. On the South China Sea, the 50-ship fleet was prepared to launch the historic evacuation. On and off "high alert" for a week, the sailors and Marines were on edge from constant alarms to "man battle stations."

The moment finally arrived. The first helicopters lifted off the decks at 1235. Marine Heavy Helicopter Squadron 463 ("Pegasus"), led by Lieutenant Colonel Herbert Fix, took off in formation of eight aircraft and headed inbound with a battalion of combat-ready infantry of the 2d Battalion, Fourth Marine Regiment, part of Regimental Landing Team 4, commanded by Colonel Alfred M. Gray.

The large Sea Stallion helicopters arrived at the DAO compound around 1400, and the Marines rapidly established security positions. The Americans and Vietnamese waiting at the compound under enemy fire were relieved to see the helicopters. They were loaded quickly onto

Battalion Landing Team 2/4 leathernecks guard the perimeter of the DAO compound at the beginning of Operation Frequent Wind.



CH-53 helicopters unload evacuees on board USS *Midway* (CVA-41).  
(Photo courtesy of Janis Jorgensen, USNI)



the aircraft, beginning a daylong ferry of evacuees from the compound to the fleet.

About 10,000 refugees rushed the walls and gates at the embassy. Maj Kean requested additional Marines to secure the embassy. The 9th Marine Amphibious Brigade, commanded by Brigadier General Richard E. Carey, deployed three platoons of 2/4 to the embassy by helicopter. The leathernecks arrived in three "Sparrow Hawk" teams, consisting of "Echo" and "Golf" company elements. Also deployed were a reconnaissance detachment and a five-man helicopter support team.

Kean then had 171 men to secure the embassy. As the evacuation came to a close at the DAO compound, Kean was advised that aircraft would be sent to the embassy, arriving in 10-minute intervals. By 2250, all evacuees had been removed from the DAO compound, and the Marines began demolition of the compound.

They destroyed sensitive equipment and set detonation charges in the buildings. As the CH-53 helicopters picked up the last of the Marines, the compound was set afire by timed detonations. The Marines could see NVA tanks entering the air base, firing their guns as the last helicopter lifted off. At that point, all helicopter assets were shifted to the evacuation of the embassy; 395 Americans and 4,475 other evacuees had been flown from the DAO compound to safety on board fleet ships.

Marine CH-53 and CH-46 helicopters landed at the embassy to evacuate Americans, third-country nationals and South Vietnamese. The weary aircrews faced thunderstorms, rain, poor visibility and sporadic ground fire. The bad weather briefly stopped the evacuation flights. As dusk fell, the fleet was going to shut down air operations, but Kean insisted that the helicopters continue. His Marines fired flares and used flashlights to guide in the helicopters. Kean had embassy security lights turned on and ensured that some cars and trucks in the parking lot had their headlights turned on to illuminate the landing zones. The helicopters arrived in intervals, carrying more and more people to the waiting ships.

**T**he aircrews could see flashes of small-arms fire below, as they took off and gained altitude. Pilots worried that NVA ground-to-air missiles would shoot them out of the sky. Their slow-moving aircraft were perfect targets for the enemy gunners.

At 0345, 30 April, President Ford ordered Ambassador Martin to stop the evacuation of foreign nationals. All flights out would evacuate the Americans. President Ford had decided to wrap up the operation, although Ambassador Martin wanted to evacuate all the friendly South Vietnamese. The President ordered Martin to leave on the next helicopter.

Just before 0500, "Lady Ace 09," a CH-46D flown by Captain Gerry Berry of Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 165, landed on the rooftop LZ and took on Ambassador Martin and his MSG detachment. Martin carried the American flag when he boarded the helicopter. The Marines had special orders to arrest and take Martin if he refused to evacuate. By then, about 975 American citizens, and 1,120 Vietnamese and third-country nationals, had been evacuated from the embassy. About 350 Vietnamese evacuees were left inside the compound.

The mob outside climbed the walls and tried to crash the gates to gain access. Maj Kean ordered the Marines to withdraw into the embassy building. The last few men muscled their way into the building and closed the doors. After confirming that all his men were in the building, Kean ordered the doors locked. The Marines withdrew up the stairs toward the rooftop LZ. The mob then drove a truck into the locked doors, surged into the building and ran up the stairs toward the Marines.

The Marines locked the grille gates on each floor behind them. The platoon leaders formed 20-man helicopter teams for the CH-46s. Outside, sporadic gunfire broke out, bullets flying wildly. Kean ordered his Marines to hunker down to avoid getting hit by stray fire. At the final door,

Marines were forced to use Mace to hold the mob in check, and then they barricaded the door with furniture and equipment.

By 0700, only 10 Marines were left on the rooftop. They were all Marine embassy security guards with Maj Kean. The wait for the next helicopter was long, and the Marines wondered if they had been left behind by mistake. The situation was extremely tense. The mob was close, and there was no telling what the desperate people would do next.

Finally, 58 minutes after the last helicopter had departed, the Marines heard the CH-46 heading their way. Its big rotor blades slapped and popped the overcast sky as it descended toward the embassy rooftop. "Swift 2-2," flown by Cpts Tom Holden and Steve Cook and crewed by Sgts Christopher Woods and Stanley Hughes of HMM-164, picked up Maj Kean and his 10 Marines and took off at 0753 for USS *Okinawa* (LPH-3) in the South China Sea. Capt Holden radioed: "This is Swift 2-2. We are airborne with 11 passengers, ground security forces on board!"

Thus ended Operation Frequent Wind, a 24-hour sustained evacuation under hostile fire. Swift 2-2 flew along the Saigon River toward the fleet. The crew chief, Sgt Woods, saw eight NVA tanks waiting to enter Saigon. Those tanks crashed through the gates of the Presidential Palace and entered the American Embassy compound 45 minutes later. The Vietnam War was over. On board *Okinawa*, Maj Kean asked about Judge and McMahon. He was told that the bodies had been evacuated to USS *Midway* (CVA-41). *Midway* indicated the two Marines were not on board.

In the tempo of operations, Judge and McMahon had been left behind. Later, because McMahon was from the Boston area, Senator Edward Kennedy's staff asked the United Nations High Commis-

As Operation Frequent Wind was winding down, a Marine CH-46F Sea Knight of Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 164, squadron number YT-14, had been flying for almost 17 hours in support of the operation. Returning in the early morning darkness to USS *Hancock* (CVA-19) for refueling, after almost two hours on "plane guard duty" (search and rescue), it pitched into the South China Sea and sank.

Its pilots, Captain William C. Nystul and First Lieutenant Michael J. Shea, went down with the aircraft. The two crewmen, Corporals Richard Scott and Steve Willis, were rescued by the valiant actions of other helicopter crews. The pilots were the last Marines to die from nonhostile action off the coast of South Vietnam.

Referring to the 16-man DAO compound security detail, Sergeant Kevin Maloney said, "They were outstanding in conduct and performance."

Sgt Ted Murray, Marine embassy security guard with the DAO compound security detail, said, "I felt the NVA let us go. They could have shot our helicopters down." Later it was confirmed that the North Vietnamese government ordered General Van Tien Dung not to shoot down any American helicopters.

Gen Dung said, "Operation Frequent Wind was an impressive achievement."

The 16 Marines on security duty at the DAO compound during Operation Frequent Wind, 29-30 April 1975, Saigon, Republic of South Vietnam, were:

GySgt Vasco D. Martin  
Sgt Kevin M. Maloney  
Sgt Halstead G. "Ted" Murray III  
Sgt Andre Stringer  
Cpl Ronald A. Mayfield  
Cpl Francis J. Richard Jr.  
Cpl Otis L. Holmes  
Cpl Charles McMahon

Cpl Steven K. Stratton  
LCpl Eric D. Boyd  
LCpl Robert E. Mondo  
LCpl Patrick F. Short  
LCpl Clyde E. English Jr.  
LCpl Bernard Winkelmann  
LCpl John C. Stewart  
LCpl Darwin Judge

—Michael L. Kelley

sion on Refugees for assistance in recovering the bodies of the two dead Marines. Both Judge and McMahon finally were brought home and given a military funeral with full honors.

*Author's note: A well done and thank you to Kevin Maloney, webmaster, and all the members of the Fall of Saigon Marines*

*Association. Their positive support allowed this tribute.*

*Editor's note: Michael L. Kelley, a freelance writer, is a Vietnam veteran and retired U.S. Army staff noncommissioned officer, who also retired from the Defense Logistics Agency.*



COURTESY OF THE FALL OF SAIGON MARINES ASSOCIATION



COURTESY OF THE FALL OF SAIGON MARINES ASSOCIATION

An NVA tank bursts through the Saigon American Embassy gate, where just hours before, South Vietnamese citizens had sought safe haven and evacuation. The Vietnam War was over for America and entering a new phase for the Vietnamese.