

ESCAPE from SAIGON

How the church survived the final days of the Vietnam War



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Air Tragedy

More often than I would like, I am asked to tell the story of my experience in the evacuation of a number of Saigon Adventist Hospital employees and church leaders from Vietnam during the fall of Saigon. Whenever I agree to tell this story, I always feel compelled to wear a particular outfit. It's called a safari suit. My wife and I always have a little debate as to whether I should wear it. I always end up saying, "I don't understand why it is that every time you wash this thing, it shrinks." She just laughs at me, because safari suits do not shrink.

I wore this outfit in Southeast Asia, where we lived, because the weather is hot and muggy. As I and other workers traveled throughout the territory for appointments, we felt comfortable wearing something light. This safari suit is lightweight. It washes quickly. And this particular suit of clothes has tremendous sentimental value to me.

I say I am asked to tell this story "more often than I would like" because it was a very traumatic experience for me. When I relate this experience, I relive it. On the night before I must tell the story, I will wake up early in the morning, rehearsing the story, going through the material in detail to refresh my memory. I often lie awake for several hours, unable to go back to sleep, reliving the most event-filled week of my entire life.

What I share with you now is being shared through the eyes of one person—myself. Others who were involved in this episode

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will have a different version, because they looked at it through different eyes, from a different perspective. What I will share with you will be the experiences, the feelings that I have lived with and will continue to live with for the rest of my life.

At the outset I want to say something very, very important. I am fully aware of the fact that human endeavor did not make it possible for many of our Vietnamese leaders and employees to escape from Saigon. There is no question in my mind that through it all the hand of God was evident. Doors that seemed to be closed were opened through His intervention. I want to give credit today to our God. I want to give glory to His name. That He used us as human instruments in this is beside the point. The important lesson for us is that, uncertain as the future may seem, we serve a God with whom all things are possible. I hope that as this story unfolds you will gain that same understanding.

I want to begin on Friday, April 4, 1975, a few weeks before the collapse of the South Vietnamese government and the fall of Saigon. A very important event transpired on that day that plays a significant role in this whole story.

Two days earlier President Ford had ordered the evacuation of Vietnamese orphans. Perhaps you recall the orphan flights. They received quite a bit of publicity. President Ford had indicated that about two thousand orphans, most of whom were fathered by American servicemen, were to receive high priority in the evacuation, and so through various agencies the children were airlifted out, with adults going along to care for them. Some of our own hospital staff and missionaries were involved in these orphan flights. The flights began on Wednesday, and by Friday they were really going into high gear.

At about four-fifteen on Friday afternoon one of the world's largest aircraft, the C-5A Galaxy Transport, lifted off from the Tan Son Nhut airbase. This aircraft is so large that three jeeps can enter into its fuselage side by side. The two huge cargo doors open

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up like a clamshell, and these vehicles can drive in. It is a two-decked airplane. On this particular day, a little over three hundred people were on board the plane. The exact count is not known even to this day. As the plane lumbered off with its precious cargo, little did anyone realize, either on the ground or in the air, what was to transpire in a matter of minutes.

The plane ascended in a very tight circle to avoid enemy anti-aircraft fire and then proceeded on an easterly course. It had reached an elevation of about 23,000 feet, over the Gulf of Tonkin. Twenty to thirty minutes following takeoff, it was struck by a terrible explosion. The two cargo doors at the back of the aircraft blew open. Because the plane was at 23,000 feet, decompression obviously occurred immediately. Some of those seated at the very back of the airplane—we don't know how many—were sucked out and fell to their deaths below. These were little children—many of them just babes in arms, most of them under twelve years old. Just kids—packed into that aircraft, some on the upper level, some on the lower level.

When the doors burst open, for some reason the explosion affected the control of the plane's tail assembly, causing the plane to be buffeted about. The only way the pilot could keep the plane flying properly was to ease back on the throttle, but as any good pilot knows, pulling back on the throttle reduces air speed and the plane immediately begins to lose altitude. The pilot made a sweeping circle, hoping to get back to the airbase, but he was losing altitude rapidly.

He was lined up with the Tan Son Nhut airport runways. Just a few miles and they would be safe for touchdown and landing. But the plane, as he reported later, was buffeting terribly. To maintain control he had to keep pulling back on the throttle, and as a result, the plane kept losing altitude. Less than two miles from the runway, the plane lost too much air speed to fly, and it crashed to the ground. It skidded along, jumped over a little

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stream, plowed on for several hundred yards, broke into several sections, and then burst into flames.

Helicopters rushed to the site and began picking up crash victims who were still alive and rushing them to the nearest hospital for emergency care. Those who were obviously dead were left to be picked up and brought to the hospital at a later time.

The area where the crash took place was a rice paddy that was inaccessible by road. Trucks and ambulances could not enter the area. To make matters worse, just the night before there had been some skirmishes with the Viet Cong right in that vicinity, so the area was unsecured as well. All through the hours of Friday night, U.S. and Vietnamese military and government officials were flying in, trying to save as many lives as possible, and bringing the survivors by chopper to the closest medical facility. The doctors, nurses, and other medical staff at the hospital worked around the clock to save the lives of these little ones who had been so adversely affected by the war. Very few children cried or complained. They were very stoical, very brave boys and girls. Many were airlifted to other places, and treatment was given to those who were able to stay at that particular hospital.

Preliminary reports indicated that 178 were killed outright, and later reports suggested that the number exceeded 200. Probably some 220 or 230 boys and girls lost their lives in that accident. At the time, this terrible tragedy had more casualties than any other airplane accident in American history. Almost without exception, passengers who were in the lower level of the aircraft were killed. When the airplane crashed, it just pushed together like a can that was stepped on. Only those fortunate enough to be on the upper level survived. Seventy to a hundred children survived, and, after adequate medical care, most of these eventually came to the United States.

The reason I tell you this story is because the hospital to which these accident victims were taken was the hospital closest

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to the scene of tragedy—Saigon Adventist Hospital, operated by the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The hospital was located less than a mile from the airport, and, as I mentioned earlier, the accident took place just a couple of miles on the other side of the runway.

I had left Saigon on the Thursday before this terrible accident took place to return to my home and office in Singapore. The headquarters for the Southeast Asia Union and the Far Eastern Division are both located in the Republic of Singapore, which is about an hour and forty minutes by jet from Saigon. I spent a great deal of time during the early part of 1975 in both Vietnam and Cambodia, trying to salvage what was left of our work.

When my office received the news of the airlift tragedy, we realized that something had to be done to augment the staff of the hospital, yet at the same time we recognized that the situation in the country was quickly falling apart. On Sabbath we received a telex from our leaders in Vietnam indicating that the military and political situation was deteriorating very rapidly. There were questions as to how long we should even continue to operate the medical facility, and they asked for the leadership from the division and the union to return.

And so on Sunday, April 6, I boarded a commercial flight that took me into Saigon. I took a window seat on the right side because I wanted to see what the crash site looked like. As we made our final descent, just before we came over the edge of the runway, I looked out, and I could not believe what I saw. The charred remains of the giant aircraft—the engines, a part of the tail assembly, a part of the fuselage—were scattered over a large area. For those brief seconds that I had to look down as we flew over, I wondered how anyone could have survived that disaster. I went to the hospital to meet with our hospital leaders and talk to them about the future plans, not only for the hospital but for our mission work as well.

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The next morning an interesting letter arrived, addressed to Harvey Rudisaile, the administrator, or, as we would say today, the president, of Saigon Adventist Hospital. This letter played an important role as the story unfolded. It was dated April 7, 1975, and here is what it said:

Dear Mr. Rudisaile:

I find it quite difficult to adequately express my personal gratitude and that of my people for the superb medical attention given the surviving victims of the recent air tragedy that deprived us of so many of our friends and the children they were trying to help.

But for the professionalism, devotion, and determination of your staff, that tragedy might well have been total in its consequence.

Please accept our undying thanks and our continued good wishes for your continued help to this community.

Gratefully,

H. D. Smith
Major General, USA
Defense Attaché

“That’s a nice letter,” we said. “A letter of appreciation from the U.S. government.” Mr. Rudisaile posted it on the bulletin board, and we thought little more of it. But in just a short time you will find how significant this letter was. I believe that out of the tragedy that took place the previous Friday afternoon, as sad and heart-wrenching as it was, came a direct blessing to God’s people, and to many of our employees in Vietnam at that time.