

BIRDS OF SAIGON

1975

In oceans around the world, remote-controlled, deep-sea probes explore the seabed. Often equipped with sonar, floodlights and an HD camera, these robotic underwater vehicles are used by oceanographers, oil companies, and treasure hunters.

Someday, one of these probes may survey a particular section of the ocean floor beneath the South China Sea where sonar will detect unusual shapes ahead. It will alert the crew of the ship on the surface above to turn on the probe's floodlights and video camera. On their screens, they will be startled to see a bizarre undersea panorama that baffles them.

HELICOPTERS

Helicopters scattered haphazardly on the seabed. Helicopters of all sizes and shapes, including Hueys, Sea Knights, Sikorsky Sea Stallions and Jolly Green Giants, and huge Chinook dual-rotor behemoths. Some rest on their side, some are upside down, and others right side up. Corrosion and an assortment of crustaceans have established a foothold on each fuselage, but there are no bullet holes or rocket blasts, and no skeletal remains of pilots or crew. There is no apparent reason why these empty undamaged military aircraft worth millions of dollars are resting at the bottom of the South China Sea.

At Brookdale's Freedom Plaza retirement community in Sun City Center, Florida, there is a resident who knows why those helicopters are on the ocean floor.

HE PUT THEM THERE

NO EASY WAY OUT



Forty years ago, Larry Chambers was on the South China Sea 100 miles off the coast of Vietnam aboard the aircraft carrier USS Midway. Larry was the Commanding Officer.

In April 1975 the Midway and two other carriers were stationed with approximately 40 other ships of various types from the 7th Fleet.

Their mission was to serve in a support role for the pending evacuation of Saigon. The exit plan, code-named "Operation Frequent Wind," was devised several years in advance, complete with an order of priority for evacuees, bus routes to Tan Son Nhut Airport, and scheduled use of commercial airliners.

However, this step-by-step airlift plan was jeopardized by approaching North Vietnamese forces. Since most American troops had withdrawn, the North Vietnamese escalated their campaign in March and April, moving south with a surprising speed that brought them close enough to Saigon on April 27 to begin targeting the airport. Rockets and artillery shells rained down, cratering runways, damaging aircraft and killing two Marines.

When the airport was shut down on the morning of April 29, the orderly evacuation plan that mostly relied on airplanes was scuttled. Helicopters were the only remaining option for rescuing the thousands who needed to escape Saigon.

A WHITE CHRISTMAS IN SAIGON

That morning, the announcer on the Armed Forces Radio station in Saigon broadcast a strange lead-in. "The temperature is 105 degrees and rising," he said before playing Bing Crosby's "White Christmas." That was the pre-arranged signal for key Americans and hand-picked Vietnamese to go to their designated assembly spots and be picked up by buses bound for helipads at the Office of the Defense Attaché and the American Embassy.

APRIL 1975

APRIL 27
NORTH VIETNAMESE
DAMAGE AMERICAN
AIRPORT RUNWAYS

APRIL 29
EVACUATION
BEGINS EARLY
MORNING

KEY AMERICANS &
VIETNAMESE
ASSEMBLE TO
DESIGNATED AREAS

Seeing the steady stream of helicopters, thousands of panicked South Vietnamese surrounded the embassy gates trying to get in.

That afternoon, approximately 100 Air Force, Marine, and Air America (CIA contractor) helicopters began flying sorties back and forth between Saigon and the Navy ships, carrying American civilians, contractors, and their South Vietnamese dependents. These back and forth flights would continue non-stop around the clock for the next 18 hours.

Many had worked for the U.S. military or other government agencies and feared reprisal executions, imprisonment, or internment in communist "re-education camps." At-risk Vietnamese government officials, senators, military officers and their families were given priority.

A SACRIFICE OF BIRDS

On the carrier Midway, Larry was amazed to see a 13-passenger Huey helicopter land and unload more than 50 desperate people. It was a sign of things to come. He kept flight operations moving at a rapid pace, allowing helicopters to only stay on deck long enough to drop off passengers, take on fuel, and lift off back to Saigon.

The flight deck of the Midway was already crowded with Marine and Air Force helicopters, deck crew, and refugees when new unexpected guests flew in from the west and circled above the carrier. They were South Vietnamese helicopter pilots who filled their aircraft with family and friends.

In interviews for the Tampa Times, Optimum Life magazine, NPR, and NavyHistory.org, Larry recalled those 18 hours were "controlled chaos." "We were evacuating people all night," he said. The ship's crew fed more than 3,000 refugees and gave up their bunks to allow the Vietnamese to rest.

The next morning there seemed to be no end in sight for the Midway crew when yet another unexpected guest flew in from the west. It was a Cessna single-engine prop plane dubbed a "Bird Dog." Although it resembled a common Cessna civilian plane, the Bird Dog model was designed for military reconnaissance. This one was piloted by a Vietnamese Air Force major who loaded his family onboard and followed the evacuation helicopters out to sea to find the Navy fleet.

18 HOURS OF
NON-STOP
EVACUATIONS
CONTINUE

MIDWAY WAS
OVERCROWDED
WITH HELICOPTERS

"BIRD DOG"
CESSNA ARRIVES

Larry explained, when a man has the courage to put his family in a plane and make a daring escape like that, you have to have the heart to let him in.

Without a working radio, the Cessna pilot made a low pass to drop a note on the Midway flight deck. On three attempts, he saw his notes bounce off into the water. On the fourth attempt, he dropped a note stuck to his pistol. That note read, "Can you move the helicopters to the other side? I can land on your runway. I can fly 1 hour more. Please rescue me. – Major Buang, wife, and 5 child." Larry later reminisced, "I didn't need the note. I knew what he wanted."

Larry had only been in command of the Midway for one month. An admiral, also on the ship, ordered him to tell the pilot to ditch the plane in the sea. But through binoculars, Larry could see that a woman and children were indeed in the plane. As a naval aviator himself, Larry knew that as soon as the Cessna wheels hit the water, the plane would flip upside down and quickly sink, making a rescue virtually impossible. Larry explained, "When a man has the courage to put his family in a plane and make a daring escape like that, you have to have the heart to let him in."

Larry got on the ship's intercom to call all personnel not on watch to report to the flight deck. Out of a crew of 4,300, a working party of more than 3,000 came topside to carry out the orders to "clear the deck." On this day, that meant pushing all helicopters in the landing area off the ship and into the water.



That assortment of helicopters belonged to the Army, the South Vietnamese Air Force, the Marines, and Air America (CIA). Larry later recalled how his men worked, "It was a demolition derby in the middle of the ocean. They were 19-year-olds. They were having fun," he said. But Larry wasn't having fun as millions of dollars of aircraft were swallowed by the ocean.

The Cessna pilot, Major Buang Ly had no training for a carrier landing, which presents the challenges of a short runway in forward motion, and possible pitching up and down and rolling side to side.

"BIRD DOG"
SIGNALS FOR
LANDING

ORDERS TO CLEAR
HELICOPTERS OFF
DECK INTO OCEAN

"BIRD DOG"
IS CLEAR FOR
LANDING

Certain that he would be court-martialed, Larry turned his back, so he could truthfully testify later, "I don't know how many helicopters were pushed over the side."

In addition, a Cessna doesn't have a tail hook, which grabs a cable that stops a landing plane from rolling off the flight deck.

After several passes, Buang descended and managed to strike a perfect landing on the carrier deck, cutting his engine as soon as the wheels touched down. The Midway crew cheered while several ran to the rolling plane to bring it to a stop.

Larry Chambers only had a little more than a minute to briefly meet Buang Ly before returning to the business at hand. More Hueys and Sea Stallions were inbound to the Midway from Saigon. After the American ambassador was evacuated, a final helicopter flight retrieved the last contingent of Marines from the embassy roof. Three hours later, North Vietnamese tanks knocked down the gate of the Presidential Palace.

The Vietnam War was over.

POST WAR EPILOGUE

In total, during an 18-hour period, Operation Frequent Wind evacuated 1,373 Americans and 5,595 South Vietnamese by helicopter. The Midway received 3,073 of those nearly 7,000 evacuees.

The crew of the Midway took up a collection to help Major Buang Ly and his family resettle in the United States.

Captain Larry Chambers' decision to ditch all those helicopters was never questioned. At the time he made that risky decision, he did not know that helicopters were also being dumped from many other ships in his task force.

Admiral Larry Chambers' retirement in 1984 capped a remarkable career, which he began as the second African-American midshipman to graduate from the U.S. Naval Academy. As a naval aviator, Larry amassed more than 5,000 flight hours and 1,000 carrier landings. He was named Captain of the USS White Plains in 1972, and in 1975 became the first African-American to command an aircraft carrier, the USS Midway.

EVACUATION
IS COMPLETE

VIETNAM WAR
IS OVER

REUNIONS



In 1987, the Cessna Bird Dog that Major Buang Ly landed on the Midway was added to the exhibits at the National Naval Aviation Museum in Pensacola. Larry and Ly were both on the way to the dedication ceremony when they spotted each other in the crowd as they arrived at the airport.

Mrs. Ly rushed to embrace Larry's wife, Sarah, and said in broken English, "My husband say your husband bravest man he ever knew." Sarah replied, "That's what my husband says about your husband."

The USS Midway has since been decommissioned and modified to serve as a floating museum, now permanently tied up at the old naval supply pier in San Diego Harbor.

Four decades after Operation Frequent Wind, several of the officers and crew involved in the Saigon evacuation set foot once again on those decks that were a stepping stone to a new life for thousands of refugees. At the 40-year anniversary celebration this year, Larry and his air boss, Vern Jumper, served as guest speakers, telling stories about their crew members who demonstrated care and hospitality to people in their dire hour of need. Vietnamese refugees also spoke, sharing stories of rescue from their perspective. They told about their children who have since grown up as American citizens, some of whom became doctors, lawyers, and even helicopter pilots.

MONUMENTS

At first glance, some might wonder why anyone would commemorate the last days of April 1975 that marked the end of the first war America lost. In the four decades since, it seems that our country has been trying to forget all things associated with Vietnam.

Yet those who were a part of Operation Frequent Wind do not forget, nor do they feel the shame or embarrassment of failure. They instead remember those two days of rescue with pride for the many ways our sailors and pilots revealed their humanitarian hearts.

Although they were forced to abandon the field of battle, they demonstrated the best of American honor and character by not abandoning their brothers in arms.

Their victory in the face of defeat is memorialized with museum exhibits that display the Sea Knight helicopter that evacuated the American ambassador, the ladder that led from the embassy rooftop to the helipad, and Major Ly's Cessna Bird Dog.

Larry Chambers mounted the original note that Buang Ly dropped from the Cessna and displayed it in the living room of his Freedom Plaza apartment (until Sarah convinced him he should give it to the Midway Museum). Among the many displays in that museum, there is a kiosk on the hangar deck that commemorates Operation Frequent Wind. Viewed by more than one million tourists each year, it tells the story of a heroic rescue mission that succeeded against the odds.

All the mementos are much like monuments, but there is one more monument that tourists will never see. It's a monument that starkly exhibits the character of a ship's captain who placed the welfare of people ahead of his career, and valued human lives as priceless – far greater than any multi-million dollar price tag.

That monument to Admiral Lawrence Chambers is a congregation of helicopters strewn in splendid disarray at the bottom of the South China Sea. These hulks of olive-colored steel that once flew above the jungle canopy now rest on the ocean floor, bearing witness to the heart of an American warrior.



Now retired, Larry Chambers currently serves as a guest lecturer at the Naval War College and hosts the annual Admiral Lawrence Chambers Golf Invitational (named for him by the USS Midway Museum) benefitting the San Diego Inner City Junior Golf Foundation.



The experiences and events described herein are the firsthand accounts of the person who is the subject of the article.