

IDEAS & ISSUES (HISTORY)

Operation Frequent Wind

South Vietnamese refugee evacuation operations:
How it looked in Provisional Marine Aircraft Group 39 (ProvMAG 39)

by LtCol James W. Washington, USMC(Ret)

I reported to MAG 36, 1st MAW, headquartered at Marine Corps Air Station (MCAS) (H) Futenma, Okinawa, Japan, in April 1974 as a staff sergeant and became the MAG-36 embarkation chief. Our staff conducted deliberate planning for several Southeast Asia contingencies including Talon Vise, the original name of the evacuation plan for Saigon, Republic of South Vietnam (RVN). As the group embark chief, my responsibilities were to ensure that the group headquarters and its subordinate squadrons were embark ready or properly prepared to deploy on a moment's notice in response to any contingency and deploy effectively and efficiently. Once deployed, my job was to keep up with these assets and ascertain that they redeployed to MCAS (H) Futenma. MAG-36 subordinate units stationed at MCAS (H) Futenma were:

- Headquarters and Maintenance Squadron 36 (H&MS 36)
- Marine Air Base Squadron 36 (MABS 36)
- Marine Attack Helicopter Squadron 369 (HMA-369: AH-1J Cobra)
- Marine Light Attack Helicopter Squadron 367 (HMLA 367: UH-1E Huey)
- Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 164 (HMM-164: CH-46 Sea Knight)
- HMM-165: CH-46
- Marine Heavy Helicopter Squadron 462 (HMH-462: CH-53D Sea Stallion)
- Marine Aerial Refueler Transport Squadron 152 (VMGR-152: KC-130 Hercules)

>LtCol Washington's last two active duty assignments were as the strategic mobility officer for II MEF (1991-94) and III MEF (1994-97). He currently works for Alion Science and Technology as a contractor in the Strategic Mobility Office, Director of Operational Logistics, U.S. Coast Guard.



CDR, 7th Fleet/VADM George Steele (center) after just arriving on the USS Blue Ridge and walking with the CDR, Amphibious Task Force 76/RADM Whitmire and the CG, 9th MAB/BGen Carey. (Photo by author.)

- Marine Observation Squadron 6 (VMO 6: OV-10 Bronco)
- Marine Air Traffic Control Unit 66 (MATCU 66)

Talon Vise would be compromised and the code name changed to Frequent Wind. Operation Frequent Wind, the final noncombatant evacuation operation (NEO) of American civilians and "at risk" South Vietnamese associated with the regime in Saigon, RVN, was executed on 29-30 April 1975. "Opera-

tion Frequent Wind,' so named because of the blowing effect caused by the helicopter's rotor blades.¹¹ Major U.S. maritime forces participating in Frequent Wind were the U.S. 7th Fleet; Amphibious Group One, which also served as Amphibious Task Force 76 (ATF 76) 7th Fleet; and the Landing Force (LF) 7th Fleet, 9th Marine Amphibious Brigade (9th MAB). The Commander, 7th Fleet was VADM George P. Steele. The Commander, ATF 76 (CATF 76) was

RADM Donald B. Whitmire. The CG, 9th MAB was BGen Richard E. Carey. CATF 76 ships assembled off the coast near Yung Tau consisted of:

- USS *Anchorage* (LSD 36)
- USS *Blue Ridge* (LCC 19)
- USS *Denver* (LPD 9)
- USS *Dubuque* (LPD 8)
- USS *Duluth* (LPD 6)
- USS *Durham* (LKA 114)
- USS *Frederick* (LST 1184)
- USS *Mobile* (LKA 115)
- USS *Okinawa* (LPH 3)
- USS *Peoria* (LST 1183)
- USS *Thomaston* (LSD 28)
- USS *Vancouver* (LPD 2)

Military Sealift Command (MSC) ships and the following aircraft carriers and additional amphibious ships, which would also carry LF aviation assets or provide berthing for Vietnamese refugees during the evacuation, assisted the ATF:

- USS *Barbour County* (LST 1195)
- USS *Hancock* (CVA 19)
- USS *Midway* (CVA 41)
- USS *Mount Vernon* (LSD 39)
- USS *Tuscaloosa* (LST 1187)

The *Midway* had U.S. Air Force (USAF) CH-53 and HH-53 Super Jolly Green Giant helicopters embarked aboard it. Additional U.S. Navy ships including 7th Fleet's flagship the USS *Oklahoma City* (CLG 5), other surface combatants, and aircraft carriers were also part of the 7th Fleet and provided support during Operation Frequent Wind. VADM Steele transferred his flag from the *Oklahoma City* to the *Blue Ridge* during the actual evacuation. MSC ships would be reinforced with Marine detachments to assist in maintaining good order and discipline and would conduct the bulk of the rescue operations at sea.

MAG-36's deliberate planning efforts for Southeast Asia contingency operations transitioned to crisis action planning in January 1975, as HMH-462, on a 24-hour alert status, became a composite squadron with attached AH-1 Cobras, UH-1 Hueys, and CH-46s and deployed with the 31st Marine Amphibious Unit (MAU) aboard amphibious ready group (ARG) shipping in anticipation of a refugee evacuation operation. The 9th MAB was ac-



CO, ProvmAG 39/Col. McLenon walking on the *Blue Ridge*. (Photo by author.)

quired about a month prior to Frequent Wind and initially consisted of the 33d and 35th MAUs. The 31st MAU became part of 9th MAB after Operation Eagle Pull, the NEO of Phnom Penh, Cambodia, was executed on 12 April 1975. The 9th MAB now consisted of the 31st, 33d, and 35th MAUs; however, shortly thereafter, it was reorganized doctrinally and consisted of:

- 9th MAB Headquarters
- Regimental Landing Team 4 (RLT 4)
- ProvmAG 39
- Brigade Logistics Support Group 4 (BSLG 4)
- Amphibious Evacuation Security Force

The Commanding Officer (CO), RLT-4, was Col Alfred M. Gray, Jr., who would later become the 29th Commandant of the Marine Corps. The CO, BLSG-4, was Col Hans G. Edebohls, and the Commander, Amphibious Evacuation Security Force,

was Maj D.A. Quinlan. The CO, MAG-36, Col Frank G. "Black Mac" McLenon, became the CO, ProvmAG-39. ProvmAG-39's skeleton staff consisted of a principal staff officer and an SNCO from each MAG-36 staff section. The S-4 (logistics officer), and my boss, was Maj Rudolph Max Nebel. By the time Operation Frequent Wind was executed, MAG-36 would deploy all of its operational helicopters as part of ProvmAG-39 aboard 7th Fleet ships. VMGR-152, with its KC-130s, would support the 9th MAB by transporting additional forces from Okinawa to intermediate staging bases closer to the amphibious objective area (AOA). HMH-463 would also be part of ProvmAG-39 for Operation Frequent Wind and had embarked its CH-53Ds aboard the USS *Hancock* in Hawaii in March. The embarked squadron and ship were ordered to the Western Pacific to join 7th Fleet forces being assembled for Southeast Asia contingency operations.

About two weeks before execution, and after all of the group's available helicopters had deployed, a few remaining MAG-36 staff members and I flew aboard a VMGR-152 KC-130 from MCAS (H) Futenma to Naval Air Station (NAS) Cubi Point, Philippines; we embarked at Naval Station Subic Bay aboard the USS *Mars* (AFS 1) for a couple of days' transit to replenish the 7th Fleet ships underway in the AOA, and later flew aboard a helicopter to the *Blue Ridge*, where I joined the ProvMAG-39 staff as the embarkation officer and S-4 chief.

ters to U.S. Navy ships in the South China Sea.

Throughout this timeframe and before the execute order was published, 9th MAB forces embarked aboard CATF 76 ships were placed on a high alert status anywhere from 24 hours to 1 hour as 9th MAB was tasked to insert ground forces in various locations in Vietnam. Many ProvMAG-39 Marines, including me, got only a couple of hours of sleep each 24-hour period in the *Blue Ridge's* supporting arms coordination center (SACC) as we didn't want to leave our posts in order to maintain situational

COM) Command Center in Honolulu, HI, was that this staging effort would require a couple of hours to complete. Also, the first helicopters that repositioned these Marines had used lots of fuel by the time cross decking was finished. Finally on the afternoon of 29 April, ProvMAG-39 helicopters went from "feet wet" over the South China Sea to "feet dry" as they flew overland in RVN. The execution phase of Operation Frequent Wind had begun!

During the next several hours on the afternoon of 29 April until the morning of 30 April, approximately 68 ProvMAG-39 helicopters would fly 9th MAB Marines in and out of Saigon and evacuate over 7,000 U.S. citizens and foreign nationals from that city. Ten USAF and some Air America helicopters would also assist in the evacuation. Several other events were occurring at the same time that we heard via the *Blue Ridge's* "1MC" (1 Main Circuit, or the shipboard public address circuit). Some of them were Air America helicopters, an airline covertly owned by the U.S. Government that supported the Central Intelligence Agency in RVN, also evacuating U.S. civilians and South Vietnamese. There were reports from some pilots that they were receiving small arms fire from disgruntled Vietnamese troops while flying over the RVN, and that the flight formations of ProvMAG-39 helicopters transporting Vietnamese refugees to ships were interrupted by Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF) helicopters escaping the country. There was utter chaos at sea as many of these helicopters were attempting to land aboard CATF ships to unload passengers. There was insufficient room aboard shipping to spot and stow these helicopters. Accordingly, many helicopters were ditched at sea as brave VNAF pilots would either hover close to the sea and jump out of their helicopters or land them in the water and bail out before the rotor blades touched the water and the aircraft rolled over on its side. I went up on the *Blue Ridge* flight deck and took pictures of the ship's crewmembers pushing a VNAF UH-1 Huey overboard. I also took a picture of an Associated Press film crew taking pictures

Mobility officers specially trained in the techniques of planning and supervising loading for an amphibious operation are assigned to LF organizations, major amphibious ships, and naval staffs within the AFs. In the LF, these mobility officers are referred to as embarkation officers.²

The Marine Corps has since redesignated embarkation officers and enlisted personnel as mobility officers and enlisted personnel. The CATF 76, 9th MAB, RLT-4, and ProvMAG-39 staffs were now all embarked aboard the *Blue Ridge*. ProvMAG-39 had aviation assets spread loaded aboard ships throughout the ATF. This would be my third involvement in the Vietnam War having spent two tours in country March 1967 to April 1968 and March 1970 to March 1971.

During the last few days of planning for Operation Frequent Wind, several options were refined including:

- Option 1: Evacuation by commercial airlift from Tan Son Nhut Air Base (AB) and other RVN airports in the vicinity as required.
- Option 2: Evacuation by Military Airlift Command (MAC) aircraft from Tan Son Nhut AB and other RVN airports in the vicinity as required.
- Option 3: Evacuation by scalfit from Saigon seaports.
- Option 4: Evacuation by helicop-

awareness regarding the operational environment in the AOA and be able to respond immediately to any tasking received from higher headquarters. The situation on the ground in RVN deteriorated quickly as several North Vietnamese Army (NVA) divisions were now poised to overrun Saigon. Option 2 was attempted briefly but was terminated early on the morning of 29 April, when a USAF C-130 at Tan Son Nhut AB was destroyed by an NVA 122mm rocket. Elsewhere, two Marines were killed by a rocket at the Defense Attach Office (DAO) compound and were the last American ground casualties in Vietnam.

Eventually, Option 4 was chosen and expected to be similar to Operation Eagle Pull, but on a much larger scale. When the execute order was received on Tuesday, 29 April, ProvMAG-39 began cross decking RLT-4 forces to various ships in preparation to launch the different helicopter waves carrying Marines into RVN. Not fully understood by the joint planners in Washington, DC, and at the U.S. Pacific Command (USPA-



Grunts embarked aboard the *Blue Ridge* getting ready to fly in-country. (Photo by author.)

of the same thing. Unbeknownst to me at the time, they filmed me running around the flight deck taking this picture, which appeared in the *Stars and Stripes* newspaper, and I get to see the film clip periodically when I watch documentaries about the end of the Vietnam War.

During one attempted landing aboard the *Blue Ridge*, a VNAF helicopter's rotor blades collided with another aircraft on the aft portion of the ship causing a loud noise that sounded like an explosion below deck in the

SACC and showered aft parts of the ship, some of its crew, and embarked troops with debris. For a brief moment when this happened, I thought that the ship had been struck by some type of NVA munitions or patrol craft that was in the vicinity of the AOA until the ship's CO, CAPT William D. Hart, restored calm by addressing the crew and embarked force via the ship's IMC. He said, "You're doing a marvelous job. I'm proud of you all. Just remember, be careful—watch yourselves and stay cool."³ I learned to fully understand



An RVN UH-1 helo being pushed overboard on the *Blue Ridge*. (Photo by author.)

and appreciate during this operation why the military uses "minimize considered" during actual or simulated emergencies to decrease the amount of record and/or voice communications on military telecommunications circuits as it took additional time to receive classified messages with an immediate or priority precedence and unclassified messages with any precedence. We were still receiving classified messages with a routine precedence and unclassified messages several days after this contingency operation ended.

Another VNAF helicopter that landed aboard the *Blue Ridge* had to be cross decked to the *Midway*. Maj Nebel had been a flight instructor at NAS Pensacola, FL, and knew how to fly all types of aircraft. He flew as the copilot with the VNAF pilot and asked me to accompany him just in case something went wrong. We flew to the *Midway*, dropped off the helicopter and pilot, and were flown back to the *Blue Ridge* later that day. Another more significant event that occurred aboard the *Midway* that day was that a VNAF Cessna O-1 Bird Dog including the pilot and his family made an emergency landing on the ship without the benefit of a tailhook.

While the helicopter evacuation was in progress, it was becoming obvious that the number of anticipated VN evacuees exceeded planning estimates. In the SACC discussions, it arose that the U.S. Ambassador to Vietnam, Graham Martin, was attempting to get large numbers of Vietnamese evacuated from the U.S. Embassy, would not get aboard a helicopter and was going to keep the evacuation going as long as possible. As stated earlier, some ProvMAG-39 flight crews flew around the clock 29–30 April, amassing anywhere from 12 to 17 flight hours per crewmember as concern arose about poor visibility at night and the pilots becoming fatigued. There were no replacement helicopter crews for them. An HMM-164 CH-46 search and rescue helicopter crashed into the sea after flying a night mission during Frequent Wind. The pilot, Capt William C. Nystul and copilot 1stLT Michael J. Shea, were lost at sea; however, the two crewmembers escaped and



A picture of an RVN UH-1 helo sinking after being pushed overboard from the Blue Ridge. (Photo by author.)

were recovered. The cause of the crash was unknown at the time. An AH-1J Cobra from HMA-369 would also crash at sea after it ran out of fuel, but the two crewmembers were rescued. Prov-

MAG-39 staff members and I worked around the clock during the execution phase of the helicopter evacuation in the Blue Ridge's SACC alongside 9th MAB and RLT-4 representatives.


Ambassador Martin embarked aboard an HMM-165 CH-46 flown by Capt Gerald L. "Gerry" Berry and was flown to the Blue Ridge on the morning of 30 April. Shortly thereafter, ProvMAG-39 helicopters carried the last Marines from the DAO compound and off the Embassy roof in Saigon, terminating Operation Frequent Wind, the largest helicopterborne evacuation in history at that time. This officially ended U.S. involvement in Vietnam. The 7th Fleet and MSC ships continued rescuing Vietnamese refugees aboard small, overloaded sealift vessels in the South China Sea for a few more days.

Within days after Operation Frequent Wind, ProvMAG-39 aviation assets would either set sail aboard or offload from CATF 76 shipping and stage at NAS Cubi Point for opportune sealift back to MAG-36 on Okinawa, Japan. I would remain in the Philippines for a while as my embarkation responsibilities shifted to coordinating the redeployment of MAG-36 personnel, supplies, and equipment back to MCAS (H) Futenma.

However, one more contingency would arise in Southeast Asia: the SS *Mayaguez* incident in Cambodia 12–15 May 1975. An ARG with a Marine headquarters element, GCE, combat service support element, and MAG-36 aviation assets would deploy for Cambodia in response to this emergency, but unfortunately would not arrive in time. The 2d Battalion, 9th Marines on alert in Okinawa would fly via MAC C-141 Starlifters to Thailand, marry up with USAF HH-53 aircraft and respond to this contingency.

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Notes

1. USS *Blue Ridge* (LCC 19) *WESTPAC III Cruise Book* (San Diego, CA: Walsworth Publishing Company, 1974–1975), 163.
2. LtCol James W. Washington, USMC(Ret), "Amphibious Embarkation Planning U.S. Navy and U.S. Marine Corps Deployment Process Transformation," *Marine Corps Gazette* (Quantico, VA: December 2011), 29.
3. USS *Blue Ridge* (LCC 19).

