

A FLOATING CITY OF REFUGE



The dramatic evacuation of Saigon took place 40 years ago this month. Bill Kelberlau was there—and he remembers it all.

By Tiffany R. White



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It's been forty years, but retired Navy Captain Bill Kelberlau still remembers the day in April 1975 when the *USS Hancock* (CVA19) was transformed from an old World War II aircraft carrier to a floating refuge. The Vietnam War had officially ended two years prior with the Paris Peace Accords. But the fighting continued between the North and South Vietnamese. Without U.S. military and financial support, the South crumbled. Eventually Saigon, the South's capital city, was surrounded by North Vietnamese eager to destroy the remaining government and those loyal to them. The *USS Hancock* and other support vessels were stationed off the coast in the South China Sea, ready to evacuate U.S. embassy personnel and Southern officials.

Plans for a safe, calm evacuation had been in place for days, but the order from Washington was de-

layed—Bill knew that sometimes politicians don't make quick decisions.

The *USS Hancock* was finally given the "Go" order as Saigon began to fall. "Here we were on April 29th and all hell broke loose," Bill remembers. "It was basically an eighteen-hour operation—one chance, no return. [Our pilots] had one shot to get in there, do what they could, and get out."

The roar of Marine H53 helicopter engines punctured the balmy, clear sky, landing in sporadic waves to unload passengers quickly on the flight deck. Highly trained sailors and Marines made the adrenaline-soaked process a fairly smooth one.

Clear the deck. Land. Unload. Leave. Repeat.

For a few brief moments, Lieutenant Junior Grade Bill Kelberlau, the ship's OZ Division Officer in charge of managing intelligence personnel



and operational intelligence, went up for fresh air and witnessed the tragedy of people saying a sudden good-bye to their homeland. Those who fled to the U.S. embassy in hope of evacuation now stood in lines on the flight deck. Most were women whose husbands didn't make it out. They held only a suitcase or a child's hand as they waited to be processed before going below to the hangar deck.

In the mounting desperation to escape the coming massacre, South Vietnamese pilots loaded their Huey helicopters and headed for the USS *Hancock*. The pictures some of Bill's staff took of sailors pushing those helicopters overboard to make room for more to land became stark public images of the tragedy.

At day's end, the USS *Hancock*—a "floating city" normally inhabited by 4,000 people—made room for 2,000 more on the eight-hundred-foot-long hangar deck normally reserved for aircraft. "The predominant smell on the hangar deck is diesel. These peo-

The USS *Hancock* was a part of Operation Frequent Wind—a final phase of evacuations of U.S. personnel and at-risk Southern loyalists. On April 29–30th, approximately 1,300 Americans and 5,600 South Vietnamese and third-country nationals were rescued by helicopters. In total, nearly 130,000 Vietnamese refugees were evacuated to the U.S.

ple were living on the hangar deck until we got them to the Philippines," Bill explains. "It would be like camping out on a tarmac at DFW [airport], where they refuel all the planes, for two days."

The crew's mission suddenly shifted from rescue to caring for their new shipmates. The galley churned out meals twenty-four hours a day. Medical staff saw to the refugees' health needs. Even the ship's band played music in the background. Bill was assigned down among the refugees for crowd control.

"It was mindboggling to see all these poor people that had just been thrown out of their country and had no idea what was going to happen to them," Bill recalls.

Two days later, the USS *Hancock* arrived in the Philippines, and the refugees began the process of rebuilding their lives. "The good part is that all these people, once they got to the States, the vast majority of them got a new life," Bill says. "They got the freedom and liberties that the war tried to give them in their own country." ■