

The Last Flight Out of Saigon

A Stewardess' Account of the Last Hours of Evacuation

By Jeannie Wood

With the imminent fall of Saigon approaching on April 30, 1975, a young stewardess named Pamela Borgfeldt Taylor, who worked for Pan American Airlines at the time, was living in Berkeley when she received a call from her supervisor to see if she would be available to go into war-torn Saigon. They would rescue Americans, among them were servicemen returning to pick up girlfriends, American Embassy personnel, the CIA, and the Pan Am ground crew. In the days that ensued, not only were her efforts, and those of her fellow crew, heroic, but also her life was at risk, as she and others airlifted almost five hundred Americans and Vietnamese out of Saigon. (*"...We all ran off the airplane, for we had special duties and people to get out. I do not remember feeling at risk; I just wanted to help as much as possible."* - Pam Taylor.)

Although there were other flights that flew into Saigon to rescue in the days prior to the fall, it was that last flight out of Saigon on April 24, Flight 841, the Clipper Unity, that was particularly daunting because the airport had been closed to all flights that morning as the North Vietnamese were approaching. Staying a step ahead of the advancing Communist troops, that flight became a "mercy" and a humanitarian one. Their intention was not only to rescue Pan Am employees and their families and other Americans -- which included the Station Manager -- but also to pack in as many Vietnamese as possible, including children and babies, aboard the 747, as commanded by the U.S. government. There were, however, as it turned out, few Americans on that last flight out. The majority was Vietnamese. Pandemonium was rampant.

People were frantically running; people were leaving. It was chaotic. The air traffic control tower was not functioning to guide the commercial flight in and out of Saigon. Landing and takeoff were risky. There were security guards, with machine guns, everywhere checking for exit visas. If you didn't have one, Pam and her cohorts became creative in "smuggling" them aboard, using disguises, stories of persuasion, and ingenuity. Those Vietnamese, who were already on board, and with the help of the Pan Am crew, filled pillowcases with whatever cash they had on hand, bribed the guards to allow more folks through. Parents were handing over their children to the crew, begging them to get them out of the country, while they stayed behind as a bold gesture of sacrifice. There was literally no time to bid farewell -- survival and freedom were their only focus. Families were torn apart. It was heart breaking, and yet Pam and her crew were committed to this humanitarian effort, amid imminent danger, crossfires, and explosions on the tarmac.

All FAA (Federal Aviation Administration) restrictions were lifted, per President Gerald Ford. No luggage was allowed on board, just people. No seat belts were required, as children and toddlers were allowed to sit on their parents' laps. Passengers overflowed and stood or sat in the aisles, in the lavatory, anywhere. Risk-taking was the least of their concerns. Packing as many people aboard the 747 and flying out of Saigon as fast as possible to escape the imminent takeover by the North Vietnamese was their only

mission. Adrenalin was high; their job was focused and fast thinking was required. When the plane was airlifted and finally on its way to the American military base in Manila, everyone breathed a sigh of relief. Many held hands with tears streaming down their faces. They were leaving their homeland for good. The passengers were forever grateful to the Pan Am crew. You saw it on their faces.

Pam experienced first-hand how war affected the innocent. To this day, her memories are vivid. Her husband, Thomas Taylor, who was stationed in Vietnam earlier, wrote a book, Where the Orange Blooms -- One Man's War and Escape in Vietnam, in which some of the above accounts were captured in stunning detail.

So powerful was that life-altering experience that bonded the crew for life - the last flight out of Saigon had their first reunion in April, 1990, in Washington DC, where many attended the movie about their plight and the premiere of *ATT Presents Last Flight Out*, a co-production with NBC. A few of the children who were airlifted back then, and now adults, also attended that tearful reunion. In 2005 the crew and passengers held a 30th Anniversary Reunion. (*"We had so many inspiring people: doctors, TV personalities, many professionals, it was something to see."* - Pam Taylor.)

Today, Pam Taylor lives with her husband Tom in Inverness, California. Cecelia Chan of Nevada City, who worked with her during their Pan Am days, referred Pam to the author for this article.