

# USS Blue Ridge



South China Sea  
off the coast of Vietnam  
1974-1975

It all started in the early morning hours of April 28 when an American-made Chinook helicopter came streaking over the horizon from the doomed city of Saigon. Piloted by a Vietnamese, the chopper circled Blue Ridge a couple of times, desperately looking for a place to land. The pilot had never landed on a ship before and, to make things worse, it was in the dead of night. However, this would not stop the determined pilot from doing what he knew he had to do: save the lives of his family and the family of his co-pilot. He slowly lowered the huge aircraft to the seemingly small flight deck of this amphibious command ship. Fearful of hitting communications antennas, he rested the helo as far aft on the ship as he could, leaving only inches to spare. Thus began the human drama that was about to unfold before Blue Ridge and her crew.

Calm seas and clear skies at midmorning of April 30 was the setting for spectacular events that were about to take place. All eyes once again were turned to the horizon. Two more helos were making their ways to Blue Ridge.

They were Air America helicopters, full of women, children and what few belongings they could gather before fleeing Saigon. The passengers were unloaded and sent through evacuee processing stations set up on the main deck. To make more room, the first helicopter lifted off the main deck and flew a couple hundred feet from Blue Ridge where it was ditched. Boat crews picked up the pilot and brought him safely aboard the ship.



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USS BLUE RIDGE

Suddenly the sky seemed to be full of helicopters. All of them were crammed with terror-stricken people, knowing they would have to return to Saigon if they couldn't find a place to land. With rotors turning, the second Air America helo was preparing to return to Saigon for more evacuees.

One South Vietnamese helo, hovering only a few feet away, disregarded flight deck crewmen's orders to move away. He was coming in despite the frantically waving crewmen's arms trying to wave him off. At the last moment, men started heading for cover, knowing what was going to happen. People were yelling, "Hit the deck! Hit the deck!", and everyone dived for the deck, covering their heads for protection. Sailors threw themselves on Vietnamese children, protecting them with their bodies.

The South Vietnamese craft set down on the very edge of the port side, but there was not enough room. Rotor blades clashed together and exploded into thousands of flying pieces. The helo jumped and twisted viciously as pieces of its blades hit the flight deck. Teetering precariously on the edge of the ship, refugees started jumping from the aircraft even before the blades had stopped turning. At least 30 Blue Ridge crewmen jumped up from the main deck and ran to the battered craft where they picked up children and leading people to safety.

Two sailors carried one woman who apparently had been injured in the crash. Hospital corpsmen began working on her immediately on the flight deck. From then on, the helos battled for air space, trying to get aboard so they



could discharge their human cargo. As soon as the helicopters were unloaded, they were flown off the ship and ditched in the sea. There was no room to keep the helos aboard. Their doors were chopped off to allow the pilots an easy exit.

One brave Vietnamese pilot repeatedly faced death as he climbed into the cockpit and dropped himself and five different choppers into the sea. Each time, he was picked up by boat crews and returned to the ship. The ditchings were spectacular. Some pilots settled

their aircraft into the sea, and others jumped while their helos were still in the air. One pilot bailed out of his helo while it was still about 100 feet in the air. Ditching the aircraft this way caused potential danger to waiting boat crews. There was no way to tell which way the helo would go once the pilot had bailed out. In another instance, a pilot seemed to be having difficulty controlling his chopper just before the rotor blades exploded and debris slammed into the side of the ship. A piece of the blades flew from the front of the ship, over the top of it and landed near the back on the flight deck. Again, no one was injured.

An Air America helo, its pilot in the water, swooped around the bow of the ship and careened into its side forward on the starboard side. It missed the open hatch of a mooring station by a scant feet; again, no injuries.

A Marine helicopter, loaded with evacuees radioed Blue Ridge that it was nearly out of fuel. The flight deck was already occupied by another helo. The helo's crash alarm began screaming the alert of a coming disaster as the aircraft began losing

altitude. All hope for a shipboard landing was thought to be lost when the chopper packed with newsmen and other evacuees began settling into the water. The pilot quickly switched to emergency fuel as he began to descend. Water was pouring into the helo, drenching its passengers. Finally, when the engines received the last bit of fuel, there was hope of getting the chopper aboard. Flight deck crews rushed to the helo already on the main deck and tipped it on its edge, hoping to allow enough room for the incoming aircraft. With an air of relief, the huge twin-rotored helo settled on the flight deck without incident and with only inches to spare. Crewmen immediately began unloading the frightened people.

Throughout all of these events, it was a wonder that no one was injured. Not one pilot or any crewmen working on the deck were hurt in the operation. If the helos were not ditched, they were pushed over the side of the ship. As safety nets and antennas became damaged, that became the desired way to get rid of excess helos.

All through the frantic landings and ditchings, were these words: "You're doing a marvelous job. I'm proud of you all. Just remember, be careful - watch yourselves and stay cool."

These events were just the introduction to the main event - "Operation Frequent Wind," so named because of the blowing effect caused by the helicopters' rotor blades. More than 40 ships and 70 helicopters took part in the world's largest helicopter evacuation. Supporting the



SAN FRANCISCO  
U.S.A.  
commander of the operation, Rear Adm. Donald B. Whitmire, Blue Ridge was the hub of the massive airlift. Thousands of Vietnamese and Americans were brought out of the beleaguered city of Saigon in 595 sorties.

USS Blue Ridge received the entire Saigon press corps during the evacuation. Representatives of AP, UPI, ABC, NBC, CBS, BBC and many other news agencies came to, stayed aboard and departed from Blue Ridge. U.S. Ambassador Graham Martin departed Vietnam via Blue Ridge along with many high-ranking South Vietnamese officials. One man familiar to news readers who followed the Vietnamese conflict, former Vice President and Air Vice Marshall Nguyen Cao Ky, arrived unheralded aboard Blue Ridge. Regardless of the station of the arriving evacuees, every effort was made to show compassion and concern, and to allow them maximum dignity in their terrible moments.

