

The Inexorable March of Time

by Col. Dennis "Bud" Traynor, USAF ret

On the 4th of April in 1975, South Vietnam was in the throes of defeat at the hands of the North Vietnamese. Days earlier, major cities and installations had already fallen – Hue, Danang, Cam Ranh, Ban Me Thout, and many others. There were five North Vietnamese divisions within 75 miles of Saigon.

The imminent fall of Saigon was also coincident with the rise of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, and the resulting genocide under Pol Pot. While some feared any evacuation would generate fear in the local population and precipitate a worse outcome, others feared the almost-certain ethnic cleansing that would ensue – especially, of the Amerasian children that would be left behind.



Babylift pilot, Bud Traynor, looking back to where the C-5A made its first touchdown before skipping across the Saigon River. (Photo courtesy of Bud Traynor).

C-5 aircraft and other aircraft especially equipped to care for orphans during the flight be sent to Saigon," and, "...for evacuation flights to begin within the next 36 to 48 hours."

This order precipitated that fateful first of the many Babylift missions.



C-5A Babylift pilot, Bud Traynor (L), with Landon Carnie (C) an adoptee who survived the crash at 17 months old and Paul Blizard (R) an American ex-pat, humanitarian and VietNam war historian, at the shrine built over the airplane nose gear strut. (Photo courtesy of Bud Traynor).

The nose did rise again, but not from elevator control, but rather the beginning of a phugoid oscillation, necessitating a fighter-style vertical recovery. The following dive was

much steeper; and without intervention, likely would have made contact with the ground. Adding full power in the dive, like flying an old biplane, made the aircraft go faster sooner, and the nose rose again; but this time, the vertical ascent was arrested at 10,000 feet.

With an angling approach back to Saigon, much like in planning a glider final, the intention was to land back on Ton Son Nhut Airbase. However, with the emergency extension of the gear, there was insufficient power to keep the nose from dropping during the turn to final. The decision to roll out lessened the decent rate and ultimately the aircraft leveled out just before first impact. Touchdown was a normal 400-500 feet per minute rate of decent. Unfortunately, it was also at approximately 276 knots – the aircraft speed at the time of the rapid decompression. And, of course, the landing surface was just rice fields separated by the Saigon river.

Today, evidence of the crash is nearly all gone. After more than 43 years, where there were once rural rice paddies physically separated from Saigon (now officially named Ho Chi Minh City, Socialist Republic of Vietnam) by the Saigon river and one of its tributaries, bridges have now been built, and the entire area is under rapid development and the inexorable march of urban sprawl. Along with more than a dozen fellow travelers, including Babylift adoptee Landon Carnie, who has returned to live in Saigon, and a local Saigon historian, Paul Blizard, Babylift pilot, I (Bud Traynor) and my wife, Pam, returned to the crash scene in early September, 2018. Over the years, Paul had been carefully charting and documenting the crash site to include the locations of some shrines set up by locals to honor the spirits of the victims.

The current expectation is for the initial touchdown location to become a water park. The debris field of the aircraft breakup is now mostly streets and buildings. The area is now simply called, Ho Chi Minh City, District 12. And, for sure, Ho Chi Minh City is nothing like it was in the early 70's. There are now "skyscrapers" – including the 14th tallest in the world – and while still Communist, the capitalist ethic is strong throughout the city, especially around the busy Bn Thành Market. Notably, few today call it Ho Chi Minh City – mostly just Saigon. So by the end of the excursion, it seemed that just maybe, most everything the US had hoped to accomplish during the conflict, happened. Who knew??

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This shrine was originally on the 2nd impact river bank. It was moved a few hundred yards further inland and is being maintained by a local. (Photo courtesy of Bud Traynor).



The Saigon (now officially named Ho Chi Minh City, Socialist Republic of Vietnam) skyline as seen from near the Operation Baby Lift C-5 crash-site. (Photo courtesy of Bud Traynor).