

Forgotten Ship: A Daring Rescue As Saigon Fell Transcript (FROM NPR)

When the Vietnam War ended and Saigon fell in April 1975, Americans got their enduring impression of the event from television.

(Soundbite of vintage news clip)

Unidentified Man: Good evening. A quarter century of American involvement in South Vietnam is over. At mid-afternoon, Saigon time, an armada of 81 U.S. Marine helicopters descended on the South Vietnamese capital. More than 6,000 persons, as many as 900 of them Americans, the rest Vietnamese and third country nationals were evacuated, plucked from U.S. Embassy grounds, from rooftops throughout the city and from the nearby Tan Son Nhat Airport.

SIEGEL: But there was another evacuation that didn't get news coverage. U.S. Navy ships saved another 20 to 30,000 Vietnamese refugees.

BLOCK: The full scope of this humanitarian rescue has been largely untold, lost in time and in bitterness over the Vietnam War.

But correspondent Joseph Shapiro and producer Sandra Bartlett, from NPR's investigative unit, interviewed more than 20 American and Vietnamese eyewitnesses. And they studied hundreds of documents, photographs and other records, including many never made public before.

Here's Joseph Shapiro with part one of our report and the story of one small U.S. Navy ship.

JOSEPH SHAPIRO: On the morning of April 29, 1975, the USS Kirk and its crew stood off the coast of South Vietnam in the South China Sea.

(Soundbite of a 1975 tape)

Mr. HUGH DOYLE (Then-Chief Engineer, USS Kirk): I'm sure as you know by this time, Vietnam has surrendered and the mass panic - almost panic-stricken retreat has already taken place.

SHAPIRO: Sitting on his bunk, the ship's chief engineer, Hugh Doyle, records a cassette tape to send home to his wife, Judy.

(Soundbite of a 1975 tape)

Mr. DOYLE: I really don't know where to start. It's been such an unusual couple of days. Where we fit in was really interesting. You're probably not going to believe half the things I tell you. But believe me, they are all true.

SHAPIRO: Doyle's cassette tapes, which until now have never been heard publicly, provide one of the best accounts of one of the most extraordinary humanitarian missions in the history of the U.S. Navy.

The Kirk's military mission that day was to shoot down any North Vietnamese jets that might try to stop U.S. Marine helicopters, as they evacuated people from Saigon. The North Vietnamese planes never came. But the Kirk's mission was about to change, and suddenly.

Doyle told Judy what he and his crewmates saw when they looked toward South Vietnam, some 12 miles away.

(Soundbite of a 1975 tape)

Mr. DOYLE: We looked up at the horizon, though, and pretty soon all you could see were helicopters. And they came and just was incredible. I don't think I'll ever see anything like it again.

Mr. PAUL JACOBS (Then-Captain, USS Kirk): It looked like bees flying all over the place. Yeah, trying to find some place to land.

SHAPIRO: Paul Jacobs was captain of the Kirk.

Mr. JACOBS: Every one of those Hueys probably had 15 or 20 on board. But they're all headed east, you know, trying to escape.

SHAPIRO: Kent Chipman, a 21-year-old Texan, worked in the engine room.

Mr. KENT CHIPMAN (Then-Crewman, USS Kirk): What was freaky and it's still - it gives me goose bumps till today, it'd be real quiet and calm and not a sound, and then all of a sudden you could hear the helicopters coming. They just - you can hear the big choop-choop-choo-choop, you know, the Hueys.

SHAPIRO: These were South Vietnamese Huey helicopters. Military pilots had crammed their aircraft with family and friends and flown out to the South China Sea. They were pretty sure that the U.S. Navy 7th Fleet was in that ocean somewhere. Now they were desperately looking for some place to land.

Here's Hugh Doyle speaking today.

Mr. DOYLE: Well, they were flying out to sea. Some of them were very low on fuel and some of them were crashing alongside the larger ships. They would crash in the water, and I don't know how many Vietnamese refugees were lost in all that.

SHAPIRO: But the helicopters flew past the Kirk. They were looking for a larger carrier deck to land.

Jim Bondgard(ph), a radar man, was watching all the traffic dotting the radarscope when Captain Jacobs issued orders.

Mr. JIM BONDGARD (Crewman, USS Kirk): The skipper got real excited. He called down to us and said, you need to try to advertise and see if you can get these guys on the radio. Just announcing where our haul number and we have an open flight deck; if you want to come land on us, we can take you aboard, and that kind of thing. You know, just trying to encourage them to come in.

SHAPIRO: There was one problem: It wasn't clear that the pilots could land on a moving ship.

Don Cox was an anti-submarine equipment officer.

Mr. DON COX (Crewman, USS Kirk): Most of the Vietnam pilots had never landed on board a ship before. Almost to a man they were army pilots and they typically landed either at fire zones, they had little clearings in the brush, or at an airport. And the ship looks very, very small and the deck was very crowded.

SHAPIRO: Cox was one of the sailors who, not sure if those pilots would land or crash, stood on the flight deck to direct the helicopters in.

The first two helicopters landed safely, but then there was no more room. The Kirk was a destroyer escort. It was built to hunt submarines, not land helicopters. It had a landing deck about the size of a tennis court.

Mr. COX: I believe it was the third aircraft landed and chopped the tail off the second aircraft that had landed. There were still helicopters circling wanting to land. There was no room on our deck, so we just started pushing helicopters overboard. We figured humans were much more important than the hardware.

(Soundbite of a 1975 tape)

Mr. DOYLE: So we couldn't think of what else to do. And these other planes were looking for a place to land. And, you know, we would have lost people in the plane so we threw the airplane over the side. Yeah, really.

SHAPIRO: As one helicopter landed and the people scrambling off, dozens of sailors ran over to push the aircraft over the side and into the ocean.

But Kent Chipman says it wasn't easy. Vietnamese helicopters were heavy. And because they were designed to land in fields, they had skids instead of wheels.

Mr. CHIPMAN: The flight deck has non-skid on it. I mean, it's like real rough sandpaper. And the Hueys didn't have tires on. They had like skids. And we had to just work it this way and work it that way, till we got it over to the edge. And then everybody there'd be like 30 people just fighting their way to get over there and try to help, you know.

SHAPIRO: With one final shove, the helicopter would totter over the edge of the ship, with its tail high in the air and then crash to the water below.

(Soundbite of a 1975 tape)

Mr. DOYLE: There were stories, horrible stories that I've heard from these refugees.

SHAPIRO: One Vietnamese pilot landed with bullet holes in his aircraft. Hugh Doyle saw he was in shock.

(Soundbite of a 1975 tape)

Mr. DOYLE: As he was loading his helicopter, had his family killed. They're standing waiting to get on the helicopter, his family was machine-gunned. He was just sitting in the helicopter. He was the pilot. He stood there and looked at them. They were all laying dead.

SHAPIRO: The crew of the Kirk fed the refugees and spread out tarps to protect them from the blazing sun.

Mr. DOYLE: We took the people up on to the 02-Level, it be just behind our stack, and we laid mats and all kinds of blankets and stuff out on the deck for their babies. And there were all kinds of - there were infants and children and women, and the women were crying. And, oh, it was a scene I'll never forget.

SHAPIRO: Kent Chipman.

Mr. CHIPMAN: These people were coming out of there with nothing - whatever they had in their pockets or hands. Some of them had suitcases. Some of them had a bag. You know, and you could tell they'd been in a war. They were still wounded. There were people young, old, army guys with the bandages on their head, arms - you could tell they'd been in a fight.

Some of the pilots and their families came from Vietnam's elite, and some of them carried what was left of their wealth in wafers of gold, sometimes sewn into their clothes. The captain locked the gold in his safe.

Then there was the helicopter that was too big to land.

Mr. CHIPMAN: This is when the big Chinook came out. And you could tell the sound of it was different; more robust, deep.

(Soundbite of a 1975 tape)

Mr. DOYLE: This huge helicopter called a Chinook. It's a Boeing. You know, remember them from my mother's house on Berthold Place? So you know those huge helicopters they made down there - those great big ones?

SHAPIRO: Doyle had grown up in Pennsylvania, near the factory that made those helicopters.

(Soundbite of a 1975 tape)

Mr. DOYLE: They came out and tried to land on the ship. Oh, we almost - the thing almost crashed on board our ship. So we finally got them to realize to wave them off, it was too big. You know, he just could not have landed. Well, he flew around us a couple of times and he was running low on fuel. Picture this: we're steaming along at about five knots and this huge airplane comes in and hovers over the fantail, opened up its rear door and started dropping people out of it. And this is about 15 feet off the fantail.

There's American sailors back on the fantail catching babies like basketballs.

Mr. CHIPMAN: The helicopter, it wasn't stationary. It'd come in and hover and, you know, trying to get close as they could. And I remember, at least twice, that he went back up - not real high, you know, 60 feet or so - and he'd slowly come back down.

The helicopter was probably eight to 10 foot in the air as - off the deck, as we were catching the people jumping out. Then we kind of scooch out to the door and just kind of drop down, you know, as easily as they could. This - I mean, juts the noise is tremendous. It's the biggest Chinook they make with the four sets wheels. The wind off this thing, it's like being in a hurricane.

SHAPIRO: One mother dropped her baby and her two young children toward the outstretched arms of the sailors below.

Mr. CHIPMAN: I remember the baby coming out. You know, there was no way we were going to let them hit the deck or drop them. We caught them. I was pretty small myself back then - weighed 130 pounds. Even as small as I am, you know, they come flying out and we caught them.

SHAPIRO: These were the Vietnamese army pilots' children. He'd saved the lives of his passengers, but now he was out of fuel and surrounded by flat, blue ocean. Hugh Doyle saw him fly the huge helicopter about 60 yards from the Kirk. Doyle uses slang and calls it an airplane.

Mr. DOYLE: He took the airplane, hovered it very close to the water, took all his clothes off with the exception of his skivvies, all by himself, no co-pilot, took all his clothes off, threw it out the window. And then he got up on the edge of the window, still holding onto the two sticks that a helicopter has to fly with. He tilted it over on its side, still flying in the air, and dove into the water. The airplane just fell into the water. It hit the water on its right-hand side. The rotors just exploded.

Mr. CHIPMAN: There were small pieces, but there were also pieces, probably 10, 15 foot long, big pieces go flying out - it sounded like a giant train wreck, you know, in slow motion, and it's loud, it's, you know, wind blowing everywhere.

The Chinook ended upside down. He dove out the side of it, the thing flipped upside down, and then it was calm and quiet again like you turned off a light switch.

I'm thinking, man, this guy just died. I said this is crazy. And his little head popped out of the water. I said, he's alive. It was pretty cool.

SHAPIRO: The pilot's name was Ba Nguyen. He and his family were among some 200 refugees rescued from 16 helicopters. On the second day those refugees, more than half were women, children and babies, would be moved to a larger transport ship.

But the heroics of the Kirk would continue. Shortly before midnight, at the end of the second day, the Kirk's captain, Paul Jacobs, got a call.

Mr. PAUL JACOBS: And that's when I got a (knocking sound) on the shoulder from the XO. He says, hey, Seventh Fleet wants to speak to you now. It's urgent.

SHAPIRO: It was the admiral in charge of the entire rescue.

Mr. JACOBS: He says we're going to have to send you back to rescue the Vietnamese navy. We forgot them, and if we don't get them or any part of them, they're all probably going to be killed.

SHAPIRO: The Kirk was being sent back to Vietnam. The South Vietnamese government had fallen; the Communists were in control now. The Kirk would be headed into hostile territory by itself.

Mr. JACOBS: So I said: Am I going to get any support? No. Am I going to get any air cover? No. You're on your own. I said: What's the rules of engagement? He said, there are none.

SHAPIRO: The Kirk set out to save the South Vietnamese Navy, and it ended up rescuing tens of thousands of desperate Vietnamese refugees. We'll tell you that story tomorrow on ALL THINGS CONSIDERED.