

Old DC-3 Rescues 98 Vietnam Orphans

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, March 23—An aviation record was established here today when an aging DC-3 evacuated 98 refugee orphans accompanied by five attendants from the Central Highlands town of Da Lat—by far the greatest number of passengers ever carried by this type of plane.

With Communist pressure mounting rapidly around Da Lat, the orphans were among the last to be evacuated.

The DC-3, owned and operated by Continental Air Services, is normally chartered to an oil prospecting company but was pressed into emergency evacuation work in cooperation with Air Vietnam.

According to Jim W. Eckes, an official of Continental Air Services here, the previous record for the number of passengers carried by the two-engine DC-3 was established in 1949, when 84 refugees were evacuated during the fall of China to the Communists.

A New Sanctuary

The orphans, ranging from less than one year old to fourteen, arrived silent and wide-eyed in Saigon, where they were loaded aboard buses and taken to a new sanctuary.

All are the wards of SOS Children's Village International, a charitable organization sustained by donations from abroad. An Austrian official of SOS, Horst Laimer, accompanied the children on the flight of an hour and a half.

"We had chartered two flights to get them out of Da Lat yesterday because the

situation is becoming worse all the time," he said, "but the province chief pre-empted them. We got our DC-3 today, though.

"The children were loaded aboard by weight rather than number, and we were within the limit—2,500 kilograms. Another plane is bringing our belongings out tonight."

The DC-3 transport plane was designed in 1935. The particular plane that made today's record flight, a C-47A military version of the DC-3, was delivered in 1942 to the United States Army Air Corps.

Strapped Down in Bunches

It currently carries the civilian registration number 11890 and its log book shows 26,000 hours flown since 1942.

"It happened that we had plenty of cargo straps, and we just had to strap the kids down in bunches for the flight," Mr. Eckes said. "The important thing, we felt, was to get them out of there as quickly as possible. Orphans always seem to get the lowest priority at times like this."

Besides the 103 passengers, the plane carried a crew of three — the pilot, Fred B. Walker, 47 years old, of Telford, Tenn., the co-pilot, Edwin Keppler Vaile, 40, of Clairmont, N.H., and a Vietnamese steward.

Commercial DC-3 airliners normally have 28 seats.

Mr. Laimer said that the orphans evacuated today brought the number now at the SOS village in Saigon to about 500. He said that this afternoon only about 2,000 persons were left in DaLat,

all of them waiting for transportation out.

He added that the province chief and his own family had left Da Lat earlier, after yesterday's flights were pre-empted. Mr. Eckes had said that there was special urgency because of fears that at any moment the road between Da Lat and its airport 15 miles away would be cut permanently.

"It was not only the danger," Mr. Laimer said, "but the price of rice in Da Lat has risen now to 150,000 piasters for a 100-kilogram bag."

Rice at such prices—equivalent to about 80 cents a

pound is beyond the reach of most Vietnamese no matter how hungry they are.

Everything flyable in Vietnam is being used to ferry refugees from many different places. They are pouring into Saigon from coastal towns as far north as Nha Trang and Qui Nhon. People in towns still farther north are mostly trying to get to Da Nang.

DC-3's served various armies all through World War II and the Korean conflict. The ill-fated French Indochina bastion of Dienbienphu was supplied by DC-3's until it fell in 1954. During the present Indochina war they have remained a mainstay.