

178 Dead in Saigon

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Crash Of U.S. War-Orphan Plane

100 Youngsters Survive 'Blowout' in the Air And Flaming Wreck

Saigon

At least 178 persons died yesterday when a U.S. Air Force plane carrying 243 Vietnamese war orphans to the United States crashed and burned in a rice paddy near Saigon.

Most of the dead were orphans aged eight months to 12 years.

A U.S. Embassy spokesman said at least 100 of the orphans and up to 20 adults survived the crash, the worst disaster in U.S. aviation history. There were 305 persons aboard the plane.

The crippled C-5A Galaxy transport — the world's largest plane — crash-landed while trying to make it back to Saigon's Tan Son Nhut airport after two huge cargo doors blew off in flight.

It was believed that some of the victims were sucked out of the plane when the cargo doors blew off, suddenly decompressing the plane. Most passengers were strapped in, however, and the decompression tore off their clothing. A hospital doctor said almost all the dead brought in were naked.

President Ford had planned to greet the orphans when they arrived at Travis Air Force Base in California on the first of the evacuation flights he has ordered to bring 2000 war orphans to new homes in the U.S.

Deeply saddened over the crash, President Ford said in San Francisco: "Our mission of mercy will continue. The survivors will be flown here when they are physical-

ly able. Other waiting orphans will make the journey."

"This tragedy must not deter us but offer new hope for the living," the President said.

The embassy spokesman said that in addition to the children — mixed-blood orphans, most sired by American GIs — the plane carried 44 U.S. mission escorts, 16 Air Force crewmen and two flight nurses.

U.S. aid officials earlier this week had refused to allow the same group of orphans to board a World Airways charter plane because they believed it was unsafe to fly with youngsters strapped to the floor, as were some on the ill-fated flight yesterday.

The plane had taken off from Saigon's international airport at 4:15 p.m. After it had flown 40 miles, both clamshell shaped doors at the rear of the huge fuselage

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UPI Telephoto

A woman who survived the crash watched a baby being brought to the hospital in Saigon

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blew off, evidently damaging hydraulic systems leading to tail controls.

Those doors are large enough for three jeeps to be driven into the plane abreast and when they blew off the air pressure inside dropped instantly.

The pilot, who was a survivor, said later this caused him to have difficulty in controlling the plane's rate of descent and ability to turn.

Major Dennis Traynor, covered with mud but unhurt, said that he attempted to land at the airport he had just left. But 30 minutes after he had taken off the plane plowed into a rice paddy area just short of the runway, disintegrated and burst into flames.

According to the Associated Press, military sources in Washington said there was a "definite possibility" that sabotage might have caused the crash.

(They said the suspicion was based on the fact that

the cargo doors of C-5As are built so that the pilot's controls should not be affected if the doors blow out.)

Pentagon officials said the rear loading doors blew off the Galaxy while it was flying at 23,000 feet. Officials said they did not know what caused the doors to blow off, but that there was no evidence the aircraft was fired upon from the ground.

A Pentagon spokesman said the fact the pilot kept the plane level and brought it in to a crash-landing so that many of the passengers survived was "a remarkable demonstration of flying skill."

South Vietnamese troops moved in quickly to seal off the crash site, an area partially under Communist control.

Helicopters swept in, taking out the injured first and then the dead.

Many of the corpses were babies who had been swapped into the transport, which had arrived here earlier in the day carrying artillery pieces and ammunition.

Most survivors were flown by helicopter to the Seventh Day Adventist hospital just outside Tan Son Nhut airport's main gate.

Some of the crewmen were injured but all but one were found alive by nightfall, the U.S. embassy said. The huge gasoline tank on the wing of the plane evidently ruptured at impact, touching off a fire that still raged when darkness fell.

Fire engines could not reach the site, a mile from the nearest road, and not far from the Saigon river.

At dusk, South Vietnamese soldiers had deployed around the site, the scene of fighting the previous night.

Vietnamese soldiers and Americans worked side by side, carrying the mangled bodies of babies to the helicopters.

"All those who survived must have been on the upper passenger deck," said Dr. William Oldham, the American chief medical adviser to the government of South Vietnam. "All those below in the cargo section must have been killed."

A U.S. air force C-9 flying ambulance was dispatched from Clark Air Base in the Philippines to Saigon to pick up the most seriously injured survivors for ferrying to the base hospital at Clark.

Pan American Airways announced that one of its 747 jumbo jets will airlift about 400 Vietnamese orphans and 50 attendants out of Saigon today under charter to the Holt International Children's Services Inc. of Eugene, Ore. The PanAm jet will fly from Saigon to Seattle by way of Guam and Honolulu, a total distance of 8000 air miles.

United Press