

Orphan Airlift Jet Crashes, 178 Die

Victims Are Mainly Viet Children

SAIGON, April 4 (AP)—The first official U.S. mercy airlift of Vietnamese children ended in flaming disaster today when the huge Air Force jetliner carrying 243 children crashed in a rice paddy.

At least half of the 305 persons aboard the C-5 Galaxy, the world's largest airplane, were killed or seriously injured.

[UPI said the U.S. embassy reported 178 persons, most of them children from eight months to 12 years old, had died.]

It was the first of the flights ordered by President Ford to bring 2,000 Vietnamese children, many of them orphans, to new homes in the United States. Ford and his wife had planned to be at Travis Air Force Base, Calif., when the Galaxy transport arrived Monday. He said the airlift would continue despite the tragedy.



By Larry Morris—The Washington Post
Barbara Fischlowitz comforts Ben as Merle gives comforting pat at National Airport.

The plane crashed with the pilot trying a desperate pancake landing in a rice paddy just 35 minutes after it had left Saigon's Tanson nhut air base this morning. It had risen to 23,000 feet when the cargo doors blew out and the plane lost its elevator, rudder and flap controls.

Pages of comic books, toys and a baby's bottle were strewn among the bodies where the mercy flight ended in torn metal and flames 1.5 miles from the airport.

Ford said he was "deeply saddened at the loss of so many lives" but "our mission of mercy will continue. The survivors will be flown here when they are physically able. Other waiting orphans will make the journey." American families had made arrangements to adopt all the children on the plane.

The pilot reported that the cargo doors blew off and he lost control because of the sudden decompression.

U.S. military officials familiar with the C5 said a saboteur could possibly have placed explosives in a passageway of the cargo compartment near the tail.

U.S. authorities said the Galaxy carried 243 children, 44 escorts, 16 crewmen and two flight nurses. They reported about 100 children and 15 to 20 adults were removed alive from the burning wreckage.

The survivors were all on the upper deck of the enormous plane, where the older children were traveling. The youngest babies were strapped to the floor on the lower deck which was crushed on impact, according to a U.S. aid official.

See PLANE, A8, Col. 1

PLANE, From A1

Earlier this week, aid officials refused to allow the same group of orphans to board a World Airways charter plane because they believed it was unsafe to fly with the children strapped to the floor.

Vietnamese militiamen were preparing a meal nearby when "suddenly we heard a big boom," one said. "We looked straight up in front of us and we saw debris flying all over the paddy field. It was a horrible thing to see."

A Vietnamese air force colonel ran through the soggy field shouting: "I think some babies may still be alive."

One flight nurse told newsmen: "I felt like I was waiting to die. I knew the cargo door had blown out. We could

enough oxygen masks. We had to keep moving them from kid to kid. We kept on our own because otherwise you get drowsy and then you go out."

A nurse who also survived the crash and asked not to be identified said the children were "getting dopey from a lack of oxygen." She said she and the other adults "had plenty of time" and talked about "what doors we were going out of when we impacted. We did not stand by the doors. We were feeding oxygen to the kids."

In San Francisco, Richard Blanchfield, the man coordinating the evacuation of Vietnamese orphans for the Friends of All Children cried

see it." She said crewmen handed surviving children up the aisles after the plane made its crash landing, broke up and began burning.

"We're all so thankful to be alive and that we got so many kids out," the nurse added. Identities of the victims were expected to be released Saturday.

According to witnesses, the plane—as high as a six-story building — appeared to land smoothly in the paddy but then bounced, the wings broke off and flames erupted. The cockpit sailed 100 yards from the fuselage.

The plane had arrived from Clark Air Base in the Philippines carrying emergency war materials, including 14 howitzers, for the hard-pressed Saigon govern-

ment and it picked up the orphans for the return trip. The pilot, identified as Dennis Traynor, escaped unhurt, said through an embassy spokesman that he was about 18 miles from Tanson nhut Air Base when he had to turn back.

Air Force Sgt. Jim Hadley, a medical technician from Sacramento, Calif., who also survived the crash unhurt, said, "You could see the hole in the back of the plane. You could see the sunlight streaming in.

"Things started flying around: eye glasses, pens, pieces of insulation tore off the ceiling. The pillows exploded. They were plastic lined.

He said "there weren't

killed in a crash outside Paris. U.S. officials in Washington said it was the first fatal crash of a C5, which the Air Force has been flying since 1970.

An hour after the crash, black smoke still billowed from the plane's cockpit. Air America and South Vietnamese helicopters plucked survivors from the wreckage, taking them to the Seventh Day Adventist Hospital near the air base. The helicopters also carried out the bodies of children and Americans who were escorting them.

The children were being sent out by six organizations which are partially funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development. Catholic Relief Services, Friends for All Children, Friends of the Children of Vietnam, the Pearl Buck Foundation, World Vision and Holt Children's Services.

The crash was one of the worst aircraft disasters on record. The worst occurred in March 1974 when 345 persons aboard a Turkish plane were

Washington Post correspondent Philip A. McCombs reported the following from Saigon:

At the crash site U.S. embassy employee Joe Kinder said the 44 adult escorts

with the children were American secretaries in the embassy and its large defense attache's office. He said they were the "initial contingent" of the evacuation of nonessential American personnel from Saigon.

An embassy spokesman denied it, saying Kinder "doesn't know what he's talking about. It's just not true."

The question of Americans leaving Vietnam now is touchy because it is felt that an exodus of Americans could trigger panic in Saigon among many Vietnamese who are desperately seeking ways to get out of the country.

Alan Carter, minister counselor for public affairs

at the embassy said: "This was not an evacuation plane. This was a group of volunteer escorts, some of whom were in any event scheduled to leave for the United States and some of whom were going to return here."

Reliable sources say American dependents have been advised by word of mouth to leave Vietnam. The embassy's official policy is that dependents who ask to leave will be allowed to do so and their expenses will be paid.

[Bob Tamarkin of the Chicago Daily News reported that the U.S. embassy is planning to issue an evacuation order for nonessential personnel over the weekend.]



U.S. Air Force C-5A jet takes off from Saigon with 243 Vietnamese children aboard, 35 minutes before it was



United Press International

to crash, killing most of the orphans. Right, the children await flight that was to take them to American homes.