

# Operation Frequent Wind

## The Evacuation of the DAO Compound And the Saigon Embassy

By Michael L. Kelley



LCpl Darwin Judge



Cpl Charles McMahon

In the darkness before dawn on 29 April 1975, two young Marines stood guard outside the United States Defense Attaché Office (DAO) compound at Tan Son Nhut Air Base in Saigon, Republic of South Vietnam. They were to provide security and assist in the evacuation of refugees from the besieged capital.

A few miles away, elements of General Van Tien Dung's North Vietnamese Army had advanced on the city and were about to overrun the air base. Communist forces had invaded the Central Highlands, rolling back the Army of the Republic of Vietnam in its path. Panic and terror caused hundreds of thousands of refugees and soldiers to flee from Pleiku, Hue and Da Nang, seeking safety in Saigon.

Lance Corporal Darwin Judge, a handsome young man from Marshalltown, Iowa, was an Eagle Scout, and he loved to ride his motorcycle with his friends. He was a good kid. Corporal Charles McMahon from Woburn, Mass., was active in the Boys & Girls Club after school and in 1971 had been selected Boy of the Year by the Woburn Boys & Girls Club.

The two Marines were part of a 16-man security guard deployed by Major James H. Kean, Commanding Officer, Company C, Marine Security Guard (MSG) Battalion. They found themselves outside the security of the embassy gates, standing guard in the dark, as North Vietnamese forces advanced toward the air base. Kean had arrived at the embassy from his company headquarters to assist his Marine security guards as the deteriorating situation worsened.

A world away, President Gerald Ford met with his staff and military advisors, planning the evacuation of Americans from Saigon. In dispatches to U.S. Ambassador Graham Martin in Saigon, the President requested a rapid evacuation before the enemy closed in on the city. However, Martin was more concerned with keeping the situation stable and not panicking the Vietnamese into outright anarchy.

As it was, ARVN soldiers and police, armed with rifles and pistols, who were capable of taking revenge against Americans, roamed the streets. Sporadic gunfire filled the air around the city, and chaos was around every corner. A sense of doom prevailed over all of Saigon.

The American Embassy was using the DAO compound as its main point of departure. All Americans and refugees who reported to the embassy were to be sent by bus to the DAO compound and processed for a flight. The North Vietnamese soon forced an end to the ambassador's plan. As the Marines stood guard, the North Vietnamese began a barrage of rocket, mortar and artillery fire, putting everyone located at the DAO compound at risk. Hundreds of evacuees and refugees at the facility were being processed for flights out of the country by chartered airlines. The runways were torn up by the enemy's direct hits, rendering them useless to fixed-wing aircraft.

Sergeant Kevin M. Maloney, the Sergeant of the Guard at the DAO compound, had three young Marines on his detail the night of 29 April. They had been in Vietnam for only a few weeks. Maloney posted Cpl McMahon and LCpl Judge to Post 1 at the outer gate. He then posted Cpl Otis Holmes to the inner gate, Post 2. As he headed to his sleeping quarters, Maloney could hear them chat across the 30 yards that separated them. "I did not know that the two young Marines on Post 1 would never live to see the sun rise," Maloney said.

Holmes recorded: "Just before 0330, we had been talking about back home and the girls we liked. Suddenly, the quiet night exploded with the sound of incoming enemy fire. I saw a 122 mm rocket hit the ground next to Post Number 1—a direct hit. The second rocket exploded next to my post, the blast throwing me into the air like a rag doll. I shot the lights out over Post Number 1."

When Sgt Maloney heard the explosions, he scrambled outside with his rifle.