

"Saigon Lady" pilot's daring escape from South Vietnam

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Brendan McDonough/Daily News: The C-130A cargo plane known as "Saigon Lady" now calls the National Warplane Museum in Geneseo home. Khiem Pham was just 27 years old when he piloted the plane during its final flight out of Saigon in 1975. Pham recently paid a visit to the plane in Geneseo.



Brendan McDonough/Daily News: Kheim Pham talks to people in Geneseo about his flight on April 3, 1975, of the C-130A cargo plane, now known as, "Saigon Lady. His efforts helped save the lives of his family and dozens of other people from the North Vietnamese forces pressing down on Saigon.

Each time Kheim Pham sees the large cargo plane nicknamed “Saigon Lady” it always brings back happy memories. “Anytime I see it I love it,” Pham said during a visit Wednesday to the National Warplane Museum in Geneseo.

Inside the museum off Big Tree Lane, Pham shared how on April 3, 1975, he stole the C-130A cargo plane and flew it with 53 people — including his family — to escape Saigon days before the South Vietnam capital fell to North Vietnamese forces.

“I think the main thing was that I just wanted my family to get out alive,” said Pham.

The Lockheed C-130 aircraft, known as the “Saigon Lady,” eventually became part of the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum’s collection. It remained at the museum’s storage and restoration facility at Dulles International Airport until the Warplane Museum expressed interest and acquired ownership in 2017.

The aircraft will be the centerpiece of a new memorial to Vietnam War veterans being planned for the National Warplane Museum in Geneseo.

Pham or Pham Quang Khiem as he is known in Vietnam, was a first lieutenant and co-pilot in the South Vietnam Air Force (VNAF) during the Vietnam War.

He was a cargo pilot with the 53rd Tactical Wing of the 5th Air Division stationed at the Tan Son Nhut air base near Saigon, and in 1975, South Vietnam was crumbling amid a North Vietnamese invasion.

Pham flew several missions into the more northerly Pleiku air base in hope of rescuing VNAF personnel as the communist forces approached.

To many Pham is a hero. He told his tales of heroism to a packed crowd inside the National Warplane Museum.

His heroic mission is well-documented and according to Pham what happened nearly 45 years ago is something that he will never forget.

On April 2, 1975, Pham caught a ride on a C-130 “bladder bird” — a fuel hauler — into Phan Rang, in hopes of pinpointing his younger brother, who was an airman there. Pham wanted to take him back to Saigon to be with the rest of their family.

Pham couldn’t find his brother, so he left without him.

On the way back to Saigon, Pham thought if Phan Rang was lost, then the communists would advance to Saigon. He started to devise a plan to escape South Vietnam with his family.

Pham heard that Singapore was looking for pilots, so he decided that was where he would go.

South Vietnam’s situation was dire at the time, as its forces collapsed like a deck of cards before the North Vietnamese communist onslaught. VNAF pilots started talking about stealing planes with their families, so commanders ordered ground crews give each aircraft only enough fuel to complete their missions.

That created a major problem for Pham. Another was finding someone to help a family escape.

One of Pham’s close friends was Major Nguyen Canh in the South Vietnam Air Force. He was in Pham’s sister unit, the 437th Squadron.

They discussed the escape and Pham told him they had to be the first, otherwise there wouldn’t be a second.

Major Canh’s family was in the city Da Lat, and he wanted to get them to Saigon before leaving. But Da Lat was overrun by the communists on April 2 and he lost contact with them.

After that, he was prepared to escape.

The next day, the C-130s — normally cargo planes — were used on bombing missions and Pham was No. 1 standby on the mission planning board, but Pham needed to tell his family his plan to escape. He told an officer he didn’t feel good and agreed to drop Pham to the bottom of the list.

Pham ran home and told one of his brothers to keep his family close to home because they were all gathered in Saigon. Pham told his family to rush to the Long Thanh Airport as soon as they heard from him.

Long Thanh was originally a U.S. Army airbase that Pham had landed at many times in training. It had been closed and deserted since the US withdrawal in 1973.

Pham's house was in a mile of the airport and he ran home and told his family to leave.

But there was a problem, since Pham and Canh were in different squadrons, and wouldn't normally fly together. Pham couldn't even get inside the squadron area because the guards didn't know him.

Adding to the difficulties, the plane Pham intended to escape with had mechanical problems, and the 437th had to borrow the 435th's C-130, designated HCF 460, and nicknamed "Saigon Lady."

Security allowed Pham in the area to collect the substitute plane for his squadron, but now Pham had to get rid of Canh's co-pilot. As it turned out, the co-pilot let Pham fly gladly because he wanted the rest of the day off to prepare for a date.

Now Pham was forced to tackle the biggest problem left of all: the fuel. He thought the plane would only have enough fuel to maybe make it to Thailand.

Pham checked the fuel to find out the entire tank was full. The man fueling the plane had taken a smoke break and filled the tank all the way — the fully fueled plane meant reaching Singapore was possible.

Lt. Pham, Major Canh, and the rest of the crew — not knowing where they were going — were prepared for takeoff. Pham took off without clearance and turned southeast instead of east.

Pham told the crew on the intercom that they were redirected to Long Thanh. The Saigon Lady landed safely and then the loadmaster opened the plane's rear ramp, loading 20,000 pounds of dry rice.

Pham's brother from Phan Rang made it to their parents' house in Saigon a few minutes before the escape. In the meantime, Pham told the crew that he was escaping Vietnam and they could come if they wanted.

The plane's flight engineer got up, then sat back down, and said he would accompany them. The senior loadmaster thought Pham and Canh were defecting to the North Vietnamese. He had

served in the VNAF for 10 years, making him a target for communist retribution, so he ran away as fast as he could.

The other loadmaster was on his first C-130 training ride and had no clue as to what was going on, so he just stood next to the open ramp.

Pham started taxiing away, but when everyone rushed to board the plane with their luggage, his 2-year-old daughter was trampled and knocked out with blood everywhere.

Pham's wife, Ngoc-My, saw her, thought she was dead and passed out, dropping their infant child on the ground. The child was left on the tarmac as Pham started to taxi but, luckily, Pham's oldest brother's wife ran out and grabbed the stricken youngster, and ran back into the moving plane — all of them recovered afterward.

As Pham started taxiing to the takeoff end of the runway, he saw the senior loadmaster speaking to a group of ARVN soldiers. As Pham and Canh turned to take off, a jeep approached and a soldier pointed an M-79 grenade launcher at the plane's cockpit.

Pham took off anyway knowing the soldiers wouldn't fire. The rear cargo ramp was still open, so Pham ran back and told the puzzled, inexperienced loadmaster to hold the switch until the ramp was up, and then ran back to the cockpit just in time to raise the landing gear.

The entire period — from landing at the airfield, to loading the passengers, to escaping — was only seven minutes.

“I was only 27 years old at the time and I think back and say to myself, ‘How can I do that?’” Pham says in retrospect.

Pham and Canh flew at treetop level until they reached the sea then they dropped down to the sea level. It got very humid in the back resulting in a thick fog forming inside the plane.

Pham's family and friends could not see each other because the fog was so thick. One hour later, Pham took the plane up to 16,000 feet and flew straight to Singapore.

“I know that I am not a stealer or cheater or (would) do something illegal but I had to,” Pham said. “During the war you have to do some things to bring your family out.”

And now the Saigon Lady — the plane Pham and his family took to freedom — is in Geneseo.

The plane was delivered last year to the National Warplane Museum after being acquired from the Smithsonian Institution, with the condition that it never be flown again. Plans to restore the plane are underway and museum officials are hoping to have them complete within the next year.

“We want to do a dedication next year during the air show. Providing that COVID does not mess up our schedules,” said volunteer Ray Ingram.

Beside the virus, another problem they face is cost.

“It will probably run about \$450,0000, plus inflation can drive it up to. We want to paint it and restore some windows to help bring it back to a visual mint condition,” said Ingram.

In addition to repairing the plane a memorial is also being planned for those who fought in the Vietnam War.

“It is really to educate and to celebrate our allies and to heal. A lot of Vietnam veterans right after the war really held some animosity. In the beginning they would not buy clothes that were made in Vietnam,” said memorial organizer Barry Culhane.

It will be a memorial that will not have names, but instead focus on the areas affected by the war.

“It will not be a wall with names, but sort of a summary of the involvement of each of those five countries and how they were involved to support American units,” said Culhane.

Several committees are being planned to oversee the project.

“We are going to put together a honorary board that will include someone from each country. Then we will put together a remote board on Zoom for some of the different citizens around the country,” said Culhane.

Honoring those who made it back and thanking them for their service is the memorial’s goal.

“They were not recognized for what they did. Some of them were spit on and had things thrown at them, when they got off the ships. Some of them said, “Why did we go that,” and threw their uniforms in the trash. We want to recognize those people,” said Ingram.