

Southern Tier

# Wings and a prayer - Vietnamese pilot's escape before the fall of Saigon

Updated May 13, 2020; Posted Apr 30, 2020



Khiem Pham holds his first born daughter Phi Van while kneeling in front of a C-130 in Da Lat, Vietnam, in 1974. Courtesy of Khiem Pham

2,729  
shares

By [Ngoc Huynh | nhuynh@nyup.com](mailto:ngoc.huynh@nyup.com)

You don't just steal a C-130 military transport plane. For starters, they're heavily guarded. Then, there is the matter of fuel. You need a crew. You need a plan. You don't just climb in and fly away. You don't just steal a C-130.

The old pilot smiles. The face is weathered, cracked from 73 years, but the eyes retain a glimmer of youth. At times, he closes them to recall the spring of 1975, when the world - long before viruses and lockdowns – went crazy.

Did it really happen? Was it nearly a half-century ago that he stole a C-130 transport plane and flew from a collapsing South Vietnam to safety in Singapore?

Yes, it happened. And yes it was that long ago.

“I got lucky,” he says with a smile. “God also watched over me.”

In April of 1975, with the Vietnam War raging to a bloody end, South Vietnamese Air Force Lt. Khiem Quang Pham had one chance – one – to save his family and himself. What resulted remains an incredible combination of luck, faith and perhaps divine intervention – a once-in-a-million set of moves that allowed Pham and 52 family members to escape South Vietnam. To this day, that unlikely journey is remembered regularly in the once-far-off place called America.



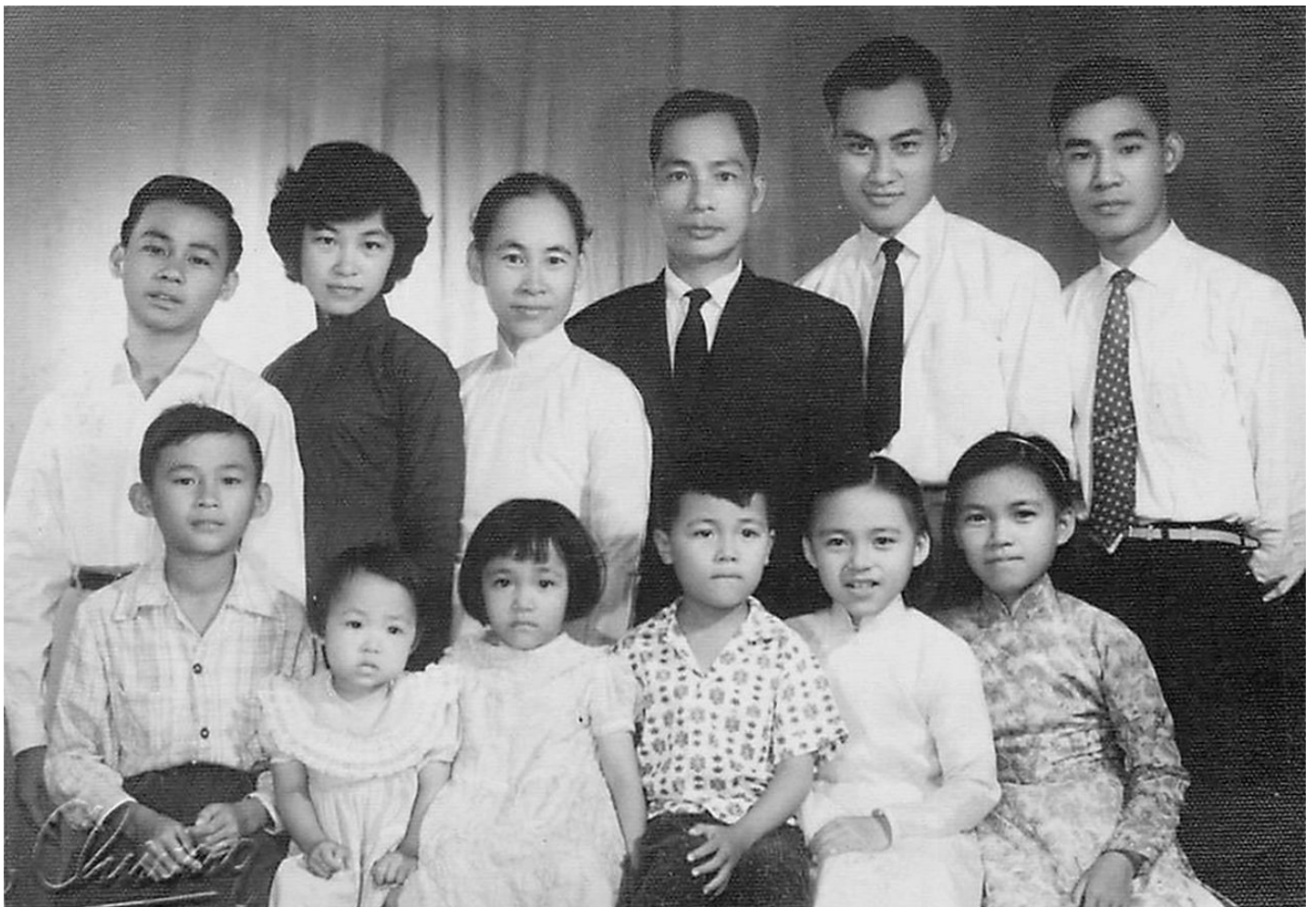
Khiem Pham stole this Lockheed C-130 aircraft and flew to Singapore with 52 family members on April 3,

1975. He visited the plane once again on April 3, 2020, and met Don Wilson, a member of the committee raising funds for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial at the National Warplane Museum in Geneseo, NY. Courtesy of Khiem Pham

Pham's plane – now on display at the National Warplane Museum in Geneseo, N.Y. – is part of a new memorial for Vietnam veterans, including some of the bravest of all – those who came from South Vietnam.

Earlier this month, he visited the plane in Geneseo. It was their fourth reunion. For the past 45 years, he kept tabs on her wherever she went. Pham said he's happy that she is retiring at the museum.

Here is his story of a last shot at survival and how he flew himself and his family to safety aboard a stolen C-130 military transport plane.



The Pham family photo in Nha Trang, Vietnam, in 1961. Khiem, age 14, stood next to his oldest sister at the top left. He came from a family of 10 siblings. Courtesy of Khiem Pham

## Pandemonium

The son of a Protestant Christian pastor, Pham grew up with four brothers and five sisters, each of the boys serving in the South Vietnamese military. Three, including Pham, flew Air Force planes. As U.S. troops steadily withdrew from Vietnam in 1973, Pham's fate grew increasingly desperate. The North Vietnamese Army was roaring into the South, unable to be stopped. Once the North took over, Pham's family would be killed or sent to reeducation camps for torture. With each passing day, as each new city fell to the Communists, Pham prayed for answers. But his chances looked bleak.

The last remaining American combat troops pulled out of Vietnam on March 29, 1973. The signed peace treaty failed as Southern and Northern forces continued fighting for another two years. In March of 1975, Communist forces had swept through the South taking the central highlands. As part of the 435th Squadron, Pham flew some of the final missions to Da Nang, including one on the night before that city fell. It didn't go well. The plan to drop off food and evacuate refugees fell into chaos. People trampled over each other, rushing to board the plane. As Pham taxied out, his loadmaster could not close the rear ramp; it was jammed with terrorized, desperate people, refusing to let go.

Pham's C-130 – built to carry 92 – lifted off with an estimated 350 refugees. They stood shoulder to shoulder, no seats, clinging to line cables that ran the length of the cabin. As the plane rose, Pham foresaw the chaotic end. He thought of his own family in Saigon and wondered how he could save them.

Lost April 3.1975 Found March 30. 2010  
( 35 Years)



Khiem Pham's original flight suit during his escape to Singapore. Courtesy of Khiem Pham

By now, other pilots were whispering about getting out. To discourage escape flights, Vietnamese Air Force officials had begun strictly rationing fuel. Planes received only enough fuel to reach the assigned destinations and back.

One of Pham's best friends, Major Canh Huu Nguyen, flew for the 437th Squadron. They discussed escaping via a stolen plane. But the stakes were high: If one pilot tried, authorities would crack down hard to stop others. They had one chance. "If we are not number one to escape, we will never be number two," Pham told his friend. They had to go – now.

### **April 3, 1975: The Great Escape**

For two days, Pham and Nguyen had secretly discussed logistics. To get out safely, they had to make sure no one else knew of their plans. Any breach would destroy their chances. The Communists had reached Da Lat, leaving Nguyen unable to contact his family. Pham believed the only way to keep the secret was to tell no one - even his family - until the last minute.

That day, at the Saigon airport, Pham and Nguyen awaited regular assignments. Pham's mission was listed first on the docket – the worst scheduling possible, because it meant he could not tell his family to pack and prepare. Pham told his superiors he felt ill. They dropped him to last on the day list. That bought time to go home, find his brother and gather all relatives at his parent's house. From there, they would drive to Long Thanh airport, an abandoned U.S. air base about 17 miles southeast of Saigon. For better or worse, they were going: Today. There was no Plan B.



Khiem Pham stands in front of the C-130 in Vietnam. Courtesy of Khiem Pham

Pham returned to the airfield and feigned business as usual. By 3 p.m., he had not been assigned a plane. Without a mission, the escape plan was dead. The wait became agonizing. Finally, Nguyen called with news: He'd been ordered to fly a food supply mission to Phan Rang. But, since they were in different squadrons, they couldn't fly together. Luckily, Nguyen's plane had mechanical problems so they had to borrow a plane from Pham's squadron. Next obstacle - getting rid of Nguyen's co-pilot. Fortunately, the fella wanted to go on a date and was thrilled to switch places with Pham without telling the higher-ups! Pham sped home and told his family the time had come: They would escape or die trying.

## **Serendipity**

Pham had one great fear -- that the plane wouldn't have enough fuel for an escape.

In the cockpit, when he flipped the master switch to check the gauge, Pham's heart leapt: *A full tank!* How could this be? Planes never carried full tanks. Then a line crewman apologized: While fueling the aircraft, he'd taken a cigarette break and overfilled it. He begged the pilots not to tell anyone. He'd go to jail. Pham said not to worry – he wouldn't say a word.

Around 4 p.m., their plane lifted off. The other crew members – a flight engineer and two loadmasters – had no clue about Pham's plan, until the aircraft landed at Long Thanh. There, after the crew unloaded 20,000 pounds of rice, Pham's 52 family members came aboard. Pham told his stunned crew that the plane was not returning to Saigon. They'd be leaving the country. They could come with him or stay. One loadmaster left the plane. And then everything went crazy.

As Pham taxied onto the runway, a military jeep pulled into view. The loadmaster on the ground ran toward it, shouting and gesturing to the South Vietnamese Army soldiers that the plane was being stolen. The jeep pulled up close, and a soldier aimed an M-79 grenade launcher directly at Pham's cockpit. It was a standoff, terrifying the pilots, crew and passengers. In that moment, Pham made the most important split-second decision in his life. Believing they would not fire on a plane full of people, Pham headed toward the runway, pressing the engines to full speed. The wheels lifted, and the plane left the soldiers in their jeep, holding their fire. He had guessed correctly.

Pham headed eastward out to sea, flying just above the tree-line to avoid radar detection. When he reached the ocean, he flew for an hour barely above the waves, then climbed to 16,000 feet – setting a course for Singapore. When Pham announced they had reached international waters, cheers erupted throughout the plane. But nobody knew what lay ahead.



Khiem Pham as a young pilot age 27 flew a C-130 plane during one of many missions in Vietnam in 1974. Courtesy of Khiem Pham

## Confusion

They touched down in Singapore around 7 p.m., in darkness and a steady rain. Pham told everyone to stay on the plane until they'd surrendered to the authorities. Pham, his brother, and Nguyen changed into civilian clothing and entered the terminal, looking for police. They found one security guard on duty. They explained the situation: They were South Vietnamese refugees seeking asylum. The guard looked dumbfounded. The office is closed, he told them. They should come back in the morning.

Pham said they needed to speak with the authorities. The guard searched for his boss, who was nowhere to be found. Around 1 a.m. – six hours after the landing – police trucks suddenly surrounded the plane. Another standoff loomed. There, Pham surrendered and asked for political asylum. The response: The Singapore Prime Minister was out of the country for two weeks. Meanwhile, police had contacted the Vietnamese Consulate.



Pham repeated to the Vietnamese official his request for asylum. He had no answer and left them at the airport with no comment. Local officials didn't know what to do. Pham suggested they give him enough fuel to fly to Australia. The costs for such fuel would be around \$5,000. The passengers passed the hat, collecting \$400 and a few gold watches, rings, and jewelry. It didn't matter. The authorities only accepted U.S. currency: Cash.



On April 23, 1975, the Interior Minister of Singapore and his staff paid a visit to Pham's family and brought trays of gifts wrapped with candy, pastries, and champagne. Courtesy of Khiem Pham

## Singapore Jail

Over the next few days, the family stayed in a cramped airport jail. They slept on floors and ate bland, tasteless food. At one point, Pham saw a Vietnamese C-130 land and anticipated the worst: It had come to take them back to Vietnam. Turned out, the plane was there for maintenance. And then, on Day Three, something happened. Their jailer said he could buy fresh food from the local markets, and the women could cook meals in the jail's kitchen. Suddenly, the guards treated them kindly, with renewed respect.

Each night, the family prayed and sang Christian hymns. The chief jailer, also Christian, personally bonded with them. On the 19th day of their captivity, a boat arrived. They were taken to an island resort – no explanation given. The next day, the Interior Minister and eight others brought gifts of candy, pastries, and champagne. “On behalf of the Singapore government, we would like to apologize for keeping you guys in jail for 19 days,” Pham recalls the Minister saying. “If anyone mistreated you, let me know.”

Next morning, the Singapore military took them back to the airport. There, they received first-class seating on a flight to Guam. Soon after, they boarded another plane for new lives in the U.S.

Many years later, Pham learned why they received the red-carpet treatment. An American pastor by the name of Richard Pendell – a former director of the Work Relief Commission for relief operations in South Vietnam and a close family friend – had heard about the family’s escape through sources in Saigon. He’d sent \$20,000 to a trusted lawyer in Singapore with a message: “By any price, you fight and make sure they don’t get sent back to Vietnam.” Pendell also sent \$10,000 to make sure Pham’s family ate well during their incarceration.



Khiem Pham reunited with Richard Pendell in the United States in 1970. Courtesy of Khiem Pham

## Remembrance

This year marks the 45th anniversary of the fall of Saigon – April 30, 1975, a bittersweet date in U.S. and Vietnamese history.

Pham lives in Dayton, Ohio. He has three children and nine grandchildren. He has worked all his life.

“I was a gas boy,” he says of his career in America. “I started from the bottom. I cleaned the toilets, took out the trash, and pumped gas in a small airplane. I made \$2.10 per hour at the time.”

Pham became a fueller, flight instructor, flight engineer and a pilot. He retired in 2006 as a pilot from US Airways with a total of 18,000 air flight hours.



Khiem Pham retired in 2006 as a pilot from US Airways with a total of 18,000 air flight hours. Courtesy of Khiem Pham

Pham's old C-130 was taken over by the U.S. Air Force. During a routine check, a former Air Force officer working for the Federal Aviation Administration recognized Pham and knew of his incredible story – the stuff of legend. As a result, Pham was reunited for the first time with the 'borrowed' C-130 in Detroit on April 23, 1985.

Last year, the Smithsonian donated the plane to the National Warplane Museum. Nicknamed the Saigon Lady, it is currently being restored and will be painted with the proper South Vietnamese Air Force markings. The estimated cost for the restoration is \$250,000, to be raised with a raffle, scheduled for May 2.

Four times, Pham has visited the plane, whom he views as an old friend. He looks forward to seeing it restored to its youthful luster.

"It makes me so proud of the South Vietnamese Air Force," he said. "I have a good life. I got lucky."



The Pham family photo in 1991 in the United States. Everyone stood or sat in the exact same positions as the 1961 family portrait in Vietnam. Khiem (top left) and all his brothers served in the South Vietnamese military. Three, including Khiem, flew Air Force planes. Courtesy of Khiem Pham



Kham Pham, his wife, three children, and nine grandchildren during a previous Christmas. Courtesy of Kham Pham



Khiem Pham attended the language school at Lackland Air Force Base in Texas as a VNAF air cadet in November 1969. He received his basic pilot training at Randolph AFB and later at Keesler AFB. Courtesy of Khiem Pham



Khiem Pham as a young air force pilot in South Vietnam in 1974 kneels by the C-130 at Tan Son Nhat Airport in Saigon. Courtesy of Khiem Pham