

Juan Valdez – Last Marine Out of Vietnam

BLUF: Master Sergeant Juan Jose Valdez was the last Marine to board the last helicopter to leave the roof of the U.S. Embassy two hours before Saigon surrendered on 30 April 1975. Valdez enlisted in the Marine Corps in 1955 and served a tour of duty in Vietnam from 1965 through 1967. He returned to Vietnam in 1974 and was in command of the Marine Security Detachment at the U.S. Embassy in Saigon. Valdez's efforts and his ten remaining Marines assured that all Americans who chose evacuation could leave Saigon. For his efforts, Valdez was awarded the Navy Commendation and Navy Achievement Medals in 1987. Valdez retired that year as a Master Gunnery Sergeant.

LEADERSHIP TRAITS DISPLAYED: Justice, Judgment, Dependability, Initiative, Decisiveness, Tact, Integrity, Endurance, Bearing, Unselfishness, Courage, Knowledge, Loyalty, and Enthusiasm.

SETTING THE STAGE: Juan Valdez was born in San Antonio, Texas, in 1937. His parents, Salome and Antonia, were second-generation Mexican immigrants who worked various jobs amongst the Hispanic community. Valdez was a good athlete who played football in high school, standing over six feet tall in 1955. Valdez joined the Marine Corps after high school completing his recruit training at MCRD San Diego. He completed his MOS training at MCB Camp Pendleton in 1956 and was assigned to Company "A" 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion 4th Marines, 3rd Marine Division near San Francisco, California. In 1965 Valdez served his first tour of duty in Vietnam with Bravo Company, 3rd Amphibious Tractor Battalion. His first Vietnam assignment was completed in September 1967, and he returned to the U.S. to become a Company First Sergeant at Camp Pendleton.

When the Vietnam War began to wind down in 1972, most of the Marine contingent in Vietnam was gone from the country, except for Marine detachments at consulates and the U.S. Embassy in Saigon. In 1974, Marine officers were no longer required as company commanders with these detachments, so Master Sergeant Valdez was sent to Saigon to serve as the Commanding Officer of the U.S. Embassy Marine Corps detachment.

THE STORY: When Valdez arrived in South Vietnam in September 1974, the country's situation was starting to unravel. North Vietnamese forces (NVA) had already violated the Paris Peace Accords and were rapidly overtaking large chunks of South Vietnamese territory. By 1 April 1975, South Vietnamese troops were trading their uniforms for civilian clothes. Marine Corps Major Jim Kean was ordered to Saigon by the Marine Corps to oversee the 45 members of the Marine Security Guard (MSG) detachment.

On 24 April, NVA soldiers reached Bien Hoa Air Base 15 miles northeast of Saigon. The following day 40 Marines from the Seventh Fleet were flown to the embassy to shore up the compound's defenses. The situation in the streets of Saigon was panic and chaos. Civilians rushed the gates seeking safety. Only those with American passports, allied foreign passports, third-country nations, Vietnamese with U.S. Mission Embassy cards, and Vietnamese with evacuation authorization documents were allowed in the compound.

At 1500 hours on 29 April, the embassy's evacuation began as the first CH-46 helicopter arrived under the code name *Operation Frequent Wind*. The CH-46s were assigned for the rooftop evacuations, and the larger CH-53s evacuated people from the compound parking lot. Reinforcements came in with the first CH-53 at 1800. Helicopters arrived at ten-minute intervals until 0500 on 30 April. The Marines were ordered to load only Americans at that point, as the helicopters would only be evacuating from the roof. Maj. Kean and MSgt. Valdez began pulling the other Marines back from their three perimeter placements. CH-46 "Lady Ace 09", piloted by Capt. Gerry Berry landed with orders direct

from President Ford that Ambassador Martin was to be loaded immediately on his helicopter. The Marines began the final evacuation from the roof, blocking doors with heavy objects from that point forward. Any person in front of the Marines was staying in Saigon. When Berry's helicopter lifted off the roof, it was assumed that all Americans were out of the U.S. Embassy.

At the bottom of the stairway blocking the double-door entryway were Valdez and ten Marines. They had locked down the elevators and barricaded the last door. However, they had missed the last helicopter. When they reached the rooftop, it was assumed that another helicopter would arrive shortly. After 20 minutes, no transport had arrived, and the gates of the embassy were fully breached. As Valdez pondered the situation and the alternates, a CH-46 appeared in the distance. When it landed, Valdez ordered all of the remaining Marines on the helicopter. As Valdez approached the ramp, it began to take off. He was about to miss the last helicopter again. After a headcount was quickly taken on the helicopter, the aircraft was ordered to land again. This time Valdez scurried for the ramp falling as he stepped onto the platform. The helicopter lifted off immediately as three Marines grabbed Valdez and yanked him aboard. The last man had finally been evacuated from the U.S. Embassy. *Operation Frequent Wind*, and the American presence in Vietnam, had officially concluded.

AFTERMATH: During the final evacuation from Saigon and the surrounding area, over 50,000 people were evacuated. From the U.S. Embassy, over 900 Americans, 1,120 Vietnamese, and third-country nationals were removed via helicopters. Marine pilots accumulated 1,054 flight hours and flew 682 sorties throughout *Operation Frequent Wind*.

During the operation, the only casualties were two Marines, Corporal Charles McMahon and Lance Corporal Darwin Judge, killed in a rocket attack on the Tân Sơn Nhứt Airport on 29 April 1975. Their bodies were not returned to the U.S. until the following year. Although this was the last ground engagement in South Vietnam, the *Mayaguez Incident* in May 1975 is considered the last action of the Vietnam War.

QUESTIONS

1. How did the actions of MGySgt. Valdez display the ethos of the Marine Corps throughout his career.
2. In what ways did *Operation Frequent Wind* demonstrate the Marine Corps mantra of "No greater friend...?"
3. Why was the evacuation of the U.S. Embassy not the final act for the Vietnam War?

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