

Helping S. Viet refugees--proceed at your own risk

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For the last 30 days, Ronald Yates, The Tribune's Far East correspondent, has been in constant danger as he covered strangling Phnom Penh in Cambodia and the lightning sweep of Red troops across South Viet Nam. He has dashed thru deadly rocket fire in Phnom Penh and has remained in several fallen South Vietnamese cities until their final hours. In this report, Yates tells of being shot at by embittered South Vietnamese troops while hovering in an army helicopter on a mission to aid imperiled refugees.



Ronald Yates

By Ronald Yates
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CAM RANH, Viet Nam—We are skimming the green hills a few miles south of Cam Ranh in a Vietnamese military helicopter, looking for refugees. We don't have to look very long.

As the Huey darts between two hills, there, below, covering every square yard of sun-scorched asphalt on Highway 1, are thousands of people

moving south, away from the relentlessly advancing North Vietnamese army.

Tho the chopper is hovering at 1,000 feet we can see that the refugees are half running, half walking. And when they see the helicopter they begin waving frantically.

"WE CAN'T GO too close," warns the pilot. "They will try to climb on if we do and they could pull us out of the sky."

Then a crew member begins kicking water containers and

sacks of rice out the door. But the plastic water containers burst upon hitting the ground.

"You'll have to go down closer," says the crewman. And the pilot reluctantly drops 500 or 600 feet.

"I'M NOT GOING down any farther. We are only 80 meters above them now," says the pilot.

There is good reason not to get too close, and it is not just because some panicky refugees will try to grab onto the

chopper's landing gear for a perilous ride to safety.

It is because South Vietnamese troops have been known to take pot shots at their own government planes that try to rescue refugees.

The crewman kicks more water containers out the door and this time they don't break. Knots of thirsty people quickly form around the 30 five-gallon jugs, and for a moment their desire to climb aboard the helicopter subsides.

Then the chopper jerks and

begins peeling away, sending startled crew members sprawling.

"They're shooting at us! Those idiots are shooting at us!" screams the pilot.

DOWN BELOW, kneeling on the ground, are maybe eight South Vietnamese soldiers. Their M-16 rifles are at their shoulders and they are firing rapid bursts at the fleeing chopper.

"It happens all the time,"

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says a crew member." They are angry because they believe the army and the government have left them here to die at the hands of the North Vietnamese Army."

"They missed us," sneers the pilot. "You see, that is why we are losing the war—our troops can't shoot."

FIVE MILES away, on a tiny back-country road, there is another knot of about 40 refugees. When they see the chopper they, too, begin waving frantically, but they are waving a Red Cross flag.

"Watch it, it could be a trick," says the copilot.

"You mean you don't think they are refugees?" I ask.

"Oh yes, they are refugees all right, but they may be using that Red Cross flag as a trick to get us to land so they can storm our chopper," he answers.

THE PILOT CIRCLES for maybe 10 minutes, dipping and diving above the crowd until he sees an old woman

and a child lying side by side on the ground.

"I'm going to take a chance and pick them up," he says, setting the chopper down about 40 yards from the group.

Two crew members leap from the chopper and stand with M-16s pointed at the crowd.

"BRING THE TWO sick people here and we will take them to a hospital," the copilot says thru a loudspeaker on the helicopter. With that, several men pick up the old woman and the child and bring them to the chopper. After they are loaded, one of the crew members asks:

"Why don't you try to rush the helicopter like most refugees do?"

"We are not animals, we are a family," says an old man, sweeping his arm over the 40 people. "We will come thru this together or we will die together."

"WHY DO YOU flee the North Vietnamese Army?" I ask.

The old man looks quizzical-

ly at me and begins talking with several other men in the group. They all laugh.

"If you are a sheep it is your instinct to flee from the tiger," he says.

"But are you sure the North Vietnamese army is the tiger you think it is?" I ask.

"ASK MY SISTER who was in Hue in 1968 when the Viet Cong shot many people," he answers. "They shot her husband, who did nothing against them. He was only a carpenter and was never in the army. They said he built buildings for the South Vietnamese army, but he never did."

A woman of about 50 is standing a few feet away, nodding in agreement.

"But do you think many people flee because of panic?" I ask.

"Yes, most of our neighbors in Nha Trang left because they saw us leaving, but I still think they are afraid of the North Vietnamese Army because it kills many people when it comes into a town," the old man says.

THE PILOT signals that he

wants to take off and the crowd backs away.

"We will take your relatives to Bien Hoa. You can find them there. Just go to the refugee office," a crewman says.

In the air again, the chopper swings out over Highway 1, well out of M-16 range. Down below, the stream of humanity inches southward.

"It is very sad for me to see what is happening to our people," the copilot says. "They walk and walk but where do they go? What will happen to us?"

It is another of those painful questions the Vietnamese people continually ask Americans in Viet Nam these days. And the only answer is no answer.