

Dave Cleland

I don't recall that Dave's path and mine crossed at the Academy. They would have been in core classes, since Dave lived in Vandenberg in 18th squadron while I lived in the New Dorm (as it was known in our time). We became friends in the 776th Tactical Airlift Squadron at Clark Air Base, PI, in 1975.

As far as I can determine, Dave became first in the class of 1973 to come under enemy fire. On 29 Apr 1975 at approximately 0300L Saigon time, Dave was on the crew of a C-130 taxiing away from the munitions storage area on the north side of Tan Son Nhut Airport in Saigon. The plane and crew were on their way to the passenger terminal to pick up another load of refugees fleeing South Vietnam.

A mortar round landed in front of the taxiing Herk. Apparently, the North Vietnamese surrounding the embattled airport did not appreciate US efforts to resupply the South Vietnamese military. A second round quickly impacted just behind the Herk. A third round hit the right wing between the fuel tanks. The aircraft shuttered from the impact and skidded a few feet. The right wing began burning.

The Captain Larry Wessels, the aircraft commander, stopped the Herk. The pilots and flight engineer pulled the engine emergency T-handles on all four engines and moved the engine condition levers to "feather." Captain Wessels ordered an emergency evacuation from the burning Herk.

Fortunately, the entire crew escaped the Herk as mortar rounds continued to rain on the airport. They ran toward another C-130 moving on another taxiway. The loadmaster on this Herk lowered the ramp for Captain Wessels, Dave and the rest of the crew to run up. As soon as the loadmaster reported all were aboard, the pilot went to full power even as the loadmaster raised the cargo ramp. This Herk took off from the taxiway, not waiting for Tower clearance.

A shot of the burning C-130 is in the documentary, "The Last Days in Vietnam," which is available on Prime Video. <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B00S9D6POK>

It was the start of the last day for US forces in Vietnam. Approximately nine hours after Dave departed, the famous helicopter evacuation of Saigon began.

Dave and his wife, Susie, were active in the shows sponsored by the Clark Air Base Officers Open Mess (CABOOM). I remember watching them perform in a production of "Guys and Dolls." Susie had a theater background. I recall hearing that she had danced with the Radio City Rockettes in New York City.

It was with great sadness that I heard of Dave's sudden death while jogging in January 1979. We lost a fine Air Force officer, and many of us lost a good friend.

Bob Decker



Source: "Last Days in Vietnam," 2014.