

The Lady Was a Tiger

Lt. Regina Aune's act of valor typified the heroism that abounded following the tragic crash of a C-5 at Saigon.

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THE spring of 1975 was a time of terror and uncertainty in South Vietnam. Its army, denied further American support by the US Congress, was disintegrating before North Vietnamese attacks in the Central Highlands. By the dawn of April, the Saigon government teetered on the brink of collapse. All President Gerald Ford could do to salvage a vestige of American honor was to rescue some of the South Vietnamese who were most likely to suffer under a Communist regime. On April 3, he directed the Air Force to begin by flying 2,000 orphans, many under the care of an American-operated hospital in Saigon, to a refuge in the United States.

Operation Babylift got under way the following day. At Clark Air Base in the Philippines, a Saigon-bound C-5 picked up a medical team headed by flight nurse Lt. Regina Aune. The giant cargo hauler was not

equipped for medical evacuation, its cockpit crew had never flown such a mission, and none of the medical team had been in a C-5 before. On the way to Saigon, Lieutenant Aune and her team were briefed on the plane's facilities and systems. The Lieutenant planned to put her small patients, some of them ill and some only a few months old, on the upper deck, which had seats and emergency oxygen masks.

When aircraft commander Capt. Dennis Traynor landed at Tan Son Nhut, Lieutenant Aune discovered that she would have about 250 orphans and several sick adults to care for on the flight back to Clark. Many of them would have to ride in makeshift accommodations on the lower cargo deck. A five-person medical team from a C-141 volunteered to help care for the unexpectedly large number of children on the flight. When all were aboard, Lieutenant Aune stationed herself, flight nurse Mary Klinker, and two medical technicians on the lower deck, where work would be most difficult.

A few minutes out of Saigon, Regina Aune climbed the ladder to the upper deck to get medicine for a patient. As she started back, an explosion blew off the plane's pressure door, center cargo door, and a large section of the loading ramp aft of the cargo compartment. Instantaneous decompression filled the fuselage with fog, dust, and blowing objects. Captain Traynor immediately turned back toward Saigon and began a rapid descent from 23,000 feet. Two hydraulic systems were out, and most of the control cables had been cut when the cargo door blew off, leaving him only engine power to regulate the plane's pitch.

He and copilot Capt. Tilford Harp, in what MAC Commander in Chief Gen. Paul Carlton called "one of the greatest displays of airmanship I have ever heard related," nursed the C-5 back to within two miles of Tan Son Nhut, where they first touched down in a rice paddy at 270 knots. The huge plane finally came to rest a half mile beyond

touchdown, broken into four sections.

Lieutenant Aune, who was in the aisle at the time of impact, was hurled the length of the upper compartment. In the shock and confusion of the crash, she realized that her right foot was broken, and she was bleeding heavily from cuts in her left arm and leg. Dragging herself off the deck, she checked the condition of the passengers, opened an emergency exit, and began helping the crew and surviving medics remove children from the shattered fuselage. The wreckage lay in waist-deep mud and water, saturated with fuel. Nearby were burning parts of the plane. One spark could turn the area into an inferno.

Within five minutes, rescue helicopters from Saigon arrived and—unable to land on the sodden ground—hovered close to the wreckage. Regina Aune, together with crew members, waded again and again through the mud to hovering choppers, their arms full of terrified children. How long Lieutenant Aune struggled before losing consciousness she doesn't remember. At a Saigon hospital, it was discovered that, in addition to deep lacerations and her injured foot, she had a fractured leg and a broken bone in her back. But mastering pain and shock, she had helped carry 149 children to safety.

One October day the following year, Capt. Regina Aune stood in the office of Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. David Jones to receive the Cheney Award for 1975, recognizing an act of valor "in a humanitarian interest performed in connection with aircraft." She was the first woman, and to this time the only one, to earn that honor.

Regina Aune felt that in accepting the award, she represented the entire crew aboard the C-5, including the eleven who perished in the crash. In a sense, that was true, but none of the eighteen surviving crew members, all of whom were decorated for heroism, deserved to be honored more than she. ■



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