PART ONE

MERCY ANGELS OF ANGKOR

THE PHNOM PENH Airlift,

1973 TO 1975

Paul Howard with Bob Hickox

It is just over 30 years since the last significant, though relatively unsung, civil airlift of the past century took place in Southeast Asia (SEA). A lengthy humanitarian affair, it was the precursor of airlifts on the African continent in the 1980s and 1990s. Undertaken in the main by aged, piston-engined airliners well past their prime, it took place within the former French Indochina (Indochine), namely Cambodia – or the Khmer Republic as it was in that period – in the two years following the 1973 implementation of the cease-fire in neighbouring Vietnam. With the 'peace' thus established, the focus on the massive war that once engulfed SEA passed into history. However, in Cambodia, the commercial side of aviation had been rising to new heights.

fuelled – ironically – by the increasing gains of communist-rogue elements determined to isolate the country. Some of the principals involved in this outwardly compassionately airlift were highly colourful and somewhat inscrutable individuals whose prime aim, behind the scenes, appeared to be to make a fat buck. Any monetary aspirations they may have had were eventually thwarted by the feelings and actions of the airmen involved, who directed their energy towards maintaining the true objective of the airlift – an extraordinary effort to prolong the freedom of the population despite the rising influence of the Khmer Rouge (KR), which threatened their future and that of the whole country.

Although the airport movement records from the Government Air Ministry (Khmer Department of Civil Aviation) in Phnom Penh for the period chronicled were
eradicated, along with all printed matter, by the KR when it took control after April 1975, some lengthy denuding by the authors— including deciphering the extensive Khmer alphabet of 74 characters, and its Sanskrit applications— offers this perspective on the operations of over 100 classic airliners flown by 30 or more carriers— both established and less orthodox—who took a direct part in this mission of mercy.

**Tranquil land turned into chaos**

A French protectorate since 1863, Cambodia had achieved independence by 1955. During the following 15 years, the country was dominated by Prince Norodom Sihanouk, first as king and then as Head of State. During this time, the traditional culture and natural charm of the population underwent a change for the worse— a result of the effects of regional strife and an onslaught of wholesale corruption which poisoned the formerly placid Asian oasis. Sihanouk was deposed in a coup by General Lon Nol while absent from the country in March 1970 and went into exile in China. Cambodia was renamed the Khmer Republic in March 1971, and anxious to preserve its neutrality from the ongoing and adjacent Vietnam war, was nevertheless unable to prevent the remote northeast from being infiltrated by North Vietnamese Army (NVA) units intent on creating dissent, despite the intensive high altitude bombardment of that localised region by the United States military which continued into August 1973.

By the onset of the monsoon season, the NVA, supporters of the extreme left Khmer Rouge movement which (despite US military advice to the contrary that the KR were being kept at bay by the repetitive bombing) was in control of most of the Republic's countryside east of the Mekong River, and was steadily gaining territory to the south and west. The Lon Nol government retained control of less than a third of the country, but this included most of the major towns and the capital, Phnom Penh, which collectively housed some 60 percent of the population. However the KR's dominance in the rural areas led to surface connections between provincial centres and the capital being increasingly cut. This resulted in the escalation of Phnom Penh's airlifts, which developed into a bona fide countrywide airlift lasting from spring 1973 to April 12, 1975.

**Opportunities of fortitude**

Following peace in Vietnam and the effects of a cease-fire in Laos, a number of veteran ‘propliners’ came to the fore in the Khmer Republic, owned, leased and operated by equally well-worn North American expatriate entrepreneurs who ran South East Asia Air Transport (SEAT), International Air, and the Tri-9 Corp. These enterprises had all been comfortably established in the region’s leasing business since 1970, and had consolidated their respective fleets back at West Camp on the discreet Seletar airfield in Singapore, to ponder the new climate and their next postwar foray into the charter market.

With uncanny foresight, these 'captains of industry' took the opportunity to enlarge their fleets and buy up additional retired prop transports from 'boneyards' on mainland USA and around the Australasian region, their endeavours neatly positioned to lease such purchases to their own companies and sub-lease or resell the veterans at 'interesting' rates to the new operators springing up in the Khmer Republic. There appeared to be no shortage of keen investors on the US West Coast where potential backers, (including New Age academics and doctors), were sold on stories of lucrative returns in the rapidly expanding Southeast Asian market.

Admittedly, some SEA nations were at this period expanding heavily in their exploration for oil, gas and mineral resources in billion dollar joint ventures with the multi-nationals, many domiciled in regional HQs at Singapore. While these large corporations were regular users of ad hoc charters for field support, the returns could not compare with the spoils enjoyed previously by the 'Captains' during the recent major conflict in the area. However, they need not have worried as there was a rapidly-developing new market on their
NOTE ON AIRCRAFT PARTICIPANTS TABLE

While every effort has been made to include all the aircraft that participated in the airlift, lack of official records mean that without doubt several 'unknowns' have slipped the net. Bearing this in mind, a number of known additional airliners operated by companies listed below may not rate a mention for reasons of the individual aircraft having not actually participated, been returned to its lessor, sold, or written off prior to the period of time in focus here.  
Flag carriers serving Phnom Penh during the airlift on scheduled services and not directly involved in the domestic airlift have also been omitted. On the other hand, some unidentified DC-3s were observed from time to time at Pochentong and may or may not have been involved in the airlift proper or in the domestic operations of Air Cambodia, while several others were noted wearing Royal Air Lao, Lang Xang (XW-TDB) and Lao Air Charter (XW-PFA) titles. Participant aircraft that escaped the fall are listed where known. Others are shown as 'fate unknown', some of them undoubtedly destroyed when the apron was shelled as the airport finally fell. Several were unserviceable, or had already been cannibalised prior to the months and weeks leading up to April 1975, and were incapable of escaping.  
Especially in the case of the DC-3 listing, several airframes took part in the airlift wearing different registrations as and when they changed ownership, and several identities are listed without known construction numbers. It is probably fair to say that with no archives for the period in question (Department of Civil Aviation, Phnom Penh), the ultimate fate of many aircraft may never be known.  
All aircraft are listed as follows:  
Registration: Construction number:  

De-facto national carrier  
By 1973, the renamed Air Cambodia (March 1971, formerly Royal Air Cambodia - RAC) the government-controlled national carrier, was still suffering from ongoing neglect to its fleet and continued corruption within its workforce, and had insufficient aircraft to carry out its task satisfactorily. The government was forced to authorise Khmer Airlines, an adequately-run local operation, as an additional licensed passenger carrier and it became only the second airline officially able to carry revenue passengers.  
Since 1971 Air Cambodia's minuscule fleet had been supported by leased aircraft from 'Mister Southeast Asia' - the foremost 'Captain' - who operated from a quasi-headquarters in Bangkok's 'Nana Hotel', an address in Phnom Penh.
Penh, and an operations base at Seletar. He was Robert ‘Big Bob’ Ferguson who, with Jack ‘You’ve-Got-the-Wrong-Guy’ Garthke of Tarrana, California, and Vice-President-Operations ‘Stealth’ (Cecil) W rotten operated South East Asia Air Transport (SEATP), with an inventory of run-down Douglas DC-3s, DC-4s and the somewhat sophisticated and costly Consolidated Convair Liners. (Note: throughout this feature, ‘DC-3’ is used as an ‘umbrella’ term for the type, be they DC-3s, C-47s or similar – m.) SEATP’s lease deals to Air Cambodia kept it airborne and included examples of the above, plus an Aviation Traders Convair, all US-registered and flown by pilots who held FAA licences. These aircraft continued to wear the basic red chevron of the former Royal Air Cambodge with the new title, retaining their ‘Apsaras’ (heavenly nymph) logo on a black chevron. In return, they operated the airline’s secondary regional services, as well as domestic flights.

China Airlines (CAL) of Taiwan was another source of equipment for Air Cambodge, leasing DC-4s which rotated regularly through the fleet at various intervals. This was before SEATP undertook them with its own DC-4s. When SEATP’s operational funds dried up, CAL once again returned to the scene with re-engined (R-2600) DC-4s offering an ability to take full payloads out of marginal strips, and supplemented with passenger-configured DC-3 B-1553 and Curtiss C-46 Commando B-1507.

Interestingly, CAL personnel also maintained Khmer Airlines aircraft (in Saigon, where CAL maintained a line presence for its Air Vietnam lease operation), keeping the fleet in reliable condition. A further source for Air Cambodge was the TRI-9 Corp, steered by another American expatriate ‘Captain’ Jim Ziegler, who supplied the maintenance-intensive Convair Liners (also US-registered), filtered through broker Air Alliance. Its brief was to place them on Air Cambodge’s domestic passenger services, task overseen in-country by John Vin, aided by Ziegler’s son Ted.

Associated with these outfits was the incorrigible ‘Stan the Man’ – Stanley Booker of Stan Airplane Sales, Fresno, California, with Don Douglas, chief pilot of Stan’s local venture, International Air, which specialised in DC-3 leasing and crew, whom he both supplied to SEATP and Air Cambodge among others that were short on pilots. Booker was well known in the Australasian region, having supplied Cessna 310s to the Indonesian Air Force (AURI). He bought several former RAAF Douglas C-47s cheaply, and used some to set up Semipati Airlines of Indonesia.

Expansion on all fronts
The Republics’ serviceable aircraft inventory, however, only totalled around 40 odd machines, far too few to satisfy the growing internal demand for air transportation, particularly freight movement. The government reluctantly invited additional foreign (independent) air operators to apply for contract and charter flying opportunities in-country, with the proviso that a registered Khmer company was ‘fronted’, and a visible Khmer identity maintained (flag and title, but not necessarily national markings). CASI, the established regional based contract operator, which had flown contracts around Indochina since the mid-1960s, had early expanded into the Khmer Republic. It created a subsidiary named Khmer Akas, using Convair Liners supplied by Jim Ziegler, to offer a regional service to Singapore, appointing Swiss Indo as its agent.

After its vital Laos and Vietnam contracts evaporated, CASI had ample equipment on hand and thus was able to expand Khmer Akas with surplus DC-3s. However, it was not long...
before CASI, a professionally-run operation, which had serviced reliable contractors in the past, refused to allow its subsidiary to accept the bureaucracy, graft and corruption then existing in the Republic, which had no rules, was highly visible and widespread, and shaved profit margins to unrealistic proportions, all in exchange for dangers to which its fleet and crew were constantly exposed.

This was no cosy joint venture similar to the agreement CASI had previously enjoyed with Air Vietnam, which had allowed it to fly in South Vietnam, and Khmer Akas ceased operations following the tragic loss of DC-3 XW-PKV at Kampot. Trading off the subsidiary and some DC-3s to Khmer Hansa, a rejuvenated local operator (the former United Khmer), several aircraft found their way back to continue on the airlift in new liveries, while the Convair were returned to TRUAV. However, CASI maintained a presence via untitled C-46 N337CA, which flew ‘embassy’ shuttles to and from Phnom Penh out of U-Tapao, Thailand, until spring 1975.

**Enter the dragon**

Following Khmer Akas' withdrawal, the Chinese connection stepped up its commitment to fill the void, via the enigmatic Captain Liao Chain Ming (‘Jimmy’ Liao), familiar with the ‘procedure’ in the Republic, its operating culture held no worries for him – he merely tailored the operation and fees to suit. He set about expanding the Cambodia Air Commercial (CAC) company (in which he had a founding stake), the operating arm (in the Republic) of Air Union, Laos, with a fleet leased from the latter of some seven Laotian-registered DC-3s, plus a trio of C-46s and the rare – but familiar – around SEA Boeing SA-307 Stratoliner. A pair of which were flown (XW-TFF, XW-TFR). CAC rapidly became one of the busiest independent operators on Phnom Penh’s Pochentong (Bao Cheng Tong) airfield.

**Registration of choice**

The majority of aircraft flying the airlift carried Laotian or US registrations, as many of the pilots were American, and therefore possessed FAA licences; for others a Laotian licence was an easier and cheaper option than a Khmer endorsement, which was riddled with red tape and necessary pay-offs. The sizeable contingent of Chinese pilots held Taiwanese licences which enabled them to fly their own ‘B’ registered aircraft, and following an ‘accommodation’

**BRITISH TYPES**

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<th>Aviation Traders Carvair</th>
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<td>N334AC 42927 (19)</td>
<td>B-2011 165</td>
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<td>SEAT, 1st Air Cambridge</td>
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<td>Pochehtong 1975</td>
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<td>Abandoned</td>
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<td>Vickers Viscount 768D</td>
<td>Air Cambridge</td>
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<td>XU-LAM 294</td>
<td>Lane Xang 1st</td>
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<td>Expended to Laos</td>
<td>Sonya Airlines</td>
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they were able to obtain a Laotian endorsement. The Khmer Aviation Authority had to put up with the influx of foreign-registered aircraft (in particular, from neighbouring Laos) operating in the country, otherwise not much was going to move – and therefore, of course, no graft and no pay-offs would be forthcoming.

Because of the bureaucracy involved, only around 14 percent of the aircraft capacity overall was actually registered in the Khmer Republic (which naturally retained the Cambodian prefix XU-). However, these included two Air Cambridge DC-4s, its long-serving DC-6B, plus a DC-3, and Khmer Airlines’ fleet of DC-3s, authorised passenger carriers. Largest of the remaining carriers was Khmer Hansa, which over time flew seven DC-3s (XU-DAG, XU-EAH, XU-EAI, XU-GAF, XU-HAK, XU-IAI, XU-LAN), and Sonya Airlines

*Above the Mekong River, Air Cambridge’s DC-3 N334AC. Note overwing exit open for ventilation.*

Ben Crawford Collection
with Vickers Viscount 768D XU-LAM and a pair of DC-3s, the latter registered in Laos. The Laos identifier was a useful ‘tool’ at the time and many aircraft operators chose it (in its way, it might be said to be a precursor of the Liberian and Sierra Leone flags of convenience applicable today).

Meanwhile, Jim Ziegler’s TR-9 Corp, the niche player with uncanny timing, was already supplying Convair Liners in the Republic. As well as these previously mentioned in Air Cambridge service, he acquired several former Indonesian examples, re-registering them with US marks, and, after performing limited maintenance at his Seattle base, put them on line. Never one to be left disadvantaged by a single type, Ziegler also moved briefly into C-46s (in true ‘Captain’s’ philosophy - to suit), acquiring a short-lived ex-CASLI example for MASCO (N9760Z, with whom he part-traded a DC-3), which was reported to have been written off on the apron at Pochentong soon afterwards when sub-leased to Hang Meas. (It was also reported to have ditched in the Gulf of Siam, off Kompong Som.)

MASCO organised a lease on a further two C-46s from TR-9, but when the contracted work for them was diverted elsewhere, the deal folded. Along with another example, the ex-Khemara Air Transport DC-3, XU-198, the DC-3 (N9422) formed the start-up fleet for a new subsidiary called Golden Eagle, whose black, white and gold livery must rate as the most impressive application of the entire airlift.

**Airstrip, road or track**

The single runway 05/23 at the curfew-imposed (18:00 to 07:00 local) airport of Pochentong split the airfield, the military apron (off limits) towards the east and the commercial apron to the west. The airport is several kilometres from the city, and the large, rectangular apron on the civil facility soon became the most congested tarmac in Southeast Asia since the non-stop movement at Saigon’s Tan Son Nhut. Later, however, it became a ‘hell’s kitchen’ after Khmer Akas CV-440 N999UL was destroyed by a 107mm multiple rocket launcher attack on June 10, 1973. The threat of an MRL hit was something that would remain a deadly ‘standing’ hazard on the ramp until April 16, 1975, if one remained too long in the same spot. (Air Cambridge’s first Sud Caravelle, XU-JTA, had fallen victim a couple of years earlier when its hangar collapsed following a similar attack).

"...THE LARGE, RECTANGULAR APRON ON THE CIVIL FACILITY SOON BECAME THE MOST CONGESTED TAMCIN IN SOUTHEAST ASIA..."

The Khmer Republic (ie Cambodia) covered an area of some 69,900 square miles (181,000km²), roughly a shade less than half the size of neighbouring Vietnam. Its 26 regional centres were connected by road – and several by rail – to the capital Phnom Penh (pre-KR rural control). Not all these towns possessed airfields, but they usually had a good spread of suitable road surface able to double as a landing strip for emergency and essential service by air, with onward carriage by vehicle if the (local) trails were open.

To the northwest of the capital lay Battambang (the second
largest city after Phnom Penh), which had a lengthy runway capable of handling all types of aircraft, and enjoyed a constant supply of goods from the nearby Thai border. Fuel drums shuttles by air were a daily exercise here. Siem Riep was a major supplier of fresh meat, with Poipet and Fallin close by. The latter town had a pub called the 'Hang Meas', a name which applied to an air company owned by the hostelry, which operated out of Pochentong. Like the carrier, the hostel was often locally referred to as the 'Hang Me!'

On the southwest coast lay the idyllic Kep, the Republic's only port. This was the busiest route after Battambang, with fuel, military equipment and general merchandise arriving by sea. Just to the north and south of the town were Kampot and Koh Kong respectively, both sources of seafood. Kampot also

<table>
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<th>BOEING 5A-307 STRATOLINER</th>
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<tr>
<td>KW-TIF 1998</td>
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<td>Isd to CAC/FR Air Union</td>
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<td>sold to RAL and w/o Mar 13, 1975</td>
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<td>KW-TFR 1999</td>
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<td>Isd to Air Union &amp; RA</td>
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<td>sub-isd to CAC and w/o Battambang Jun 27, 1974</td>
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The notorious Angkor Wat CV-340 XW-317 in the paint above the ruins of Runway 23 at Pochentong, Via Dente.

C-36 XM-PMF in Royal Air Force livery but wearing Cambodia Air Commercial titles, in addition to small Air Union nose titles.

VIA SCHERER

Alternative air force mission

Into these outposts of anti-KR feeling, the 'Angels' airlift food and supplies daily. Several routes included more than one call, such as Poipet-Kampot-Thom-Krakor, Poipet-Siem Riep-Kampot Thom, Poipet-Kampot-Chhinang-Siem Riep. Outbound loads from the capital comprised rice issued to the provincial centres under the government distribution scheme - which should have been delivered by the Khmer Air Force (KhAF, the former AVR) - and fuel in drums. The rural sector would more

dreaded Siem Riep. The latter was a 'graveyard' if ever there was one, with probably the worst section of road selected as a landing area in the whole country - and additionally, very insecure.
than reciprocate on the return flights, providing everything necessary to sustain a capital city — not only staples like sweet potato and sugar, but also watermelons, black pepper, durian (a local fruit with supposedly aphrodisiac qualities but a legendary awful smell), peanuts, poultry, fresh beef, palm butter, fresh fish and crabs, and most of the goods found in an Indochina market place.

International aid agencies like the Red Cross and World Vision, which maintained active offices in the capital, frequently hired aircraft ad hoc to distribute aid, which would normally arrive on the Mekong River and taken from there to Pochentong airport by truck. Carrying passengers was always a contentious issue: only Air Cambodia and Khmer Airlines were authorised to do so. Kompong Chhnang was a collection centre for sick or wounded personnel, and casualties were flown out on the first aircraft going to the capital, (although it was reported the Air Force charged). However, in the case of the 'walk-up' hopefuls, it all depended on who owed whom, and how much exchange of Reed took place. The Kh AF, which operated a number of C-47s and several Fairchild C-123 Providers in the pure transport role, were prominent subscribers to this unofficial cash opportunity — instead of concentrating on delivering rice to the local populace, a task now largely administered by the 'Angels'. Supposedly routine sorties and exercises by the KhAF transport pilots ensured that a landing would always be made at a location with potential returns. Passengers were obviously preferred, though freight was accepted when 'walk-on' pickings were lean, to be sold for good profits back in Phnom Penh.

The pilots of the Khmer Air Force transport squadrons (in marked contrast to the flyertho squadrons) were a law unto
themseves. Operating unchallenged—often selfishly when it came to airmanship—they gave no thought to others of uncontrolled rural airstrips, penetrating the circuit unannounced and, in some cases, blocking thresholds and exits after landing.

**THE PILOTS OF THE KHMER AIR FORCE TRANSPORT SQUADRONS... WERE A LAW UNTO THEMSELVES.**

Evermore 'angels'

Because of generous US subsidies on aviation gas (Avgas) the (mainly) Chinese merchants were in a position to start up a company with one or two aeroplanes, or at least to charter or contract their requirements from those already in business. This would airlift their goods into Phnom Penh from the rural sector at much more economical rates than by using costly, but efficient, operators such as AAM and CASI, now dormant in this role. As a result, the number of operators had grown prolifically by the middle of 1974. Many of the aircraft in use had already been in the country long-term and had seen service with several redundant carriers. Soon they were only recognizable by their call-sign, as newly-applied house livettes were rated a higher priority than maintenance in many instances. Evidence of unofficial 'swaps' was apparent.

Early start-ups included the well-run Khmera Air Transport of Monsieur Maku, with a pair of DC-3s (XW-TEB, XW-TEF) and a short-leased DC-4 (N1965E) which took some ground fire during its tenure. This Skymaster had an eventful ferry flight from California in 1971, flown by Bill Davis (Tri-9 Chief Pilot) and Stan Hooker. Clearing customs, it was noted that it had been loaded the cabin with 'one-armed bandits' bought in Nevada before the flight and not disclosed them on the manifests.

Never down for long, Ziegler's Tri-9 founded yet another subsidiary called Angkor Wat Airlines, equipping it with Convair 340 XW-PJZ flown by a former German Nationalist Air Force fighter pilot who had his own set of flying rules. He soon grounded his aircraft following a number of incidents which included the blowing of tires and tail strikes. Tri-9 had a good reputation for maintenance and was one of the few companies, which kept up standards, but this was something it did not need. It closed the subsidiary down, re-leasing the Convair to Royal Air Lao (RAL). At one stage Ziegler considered expanding into DC-3 equipment, and acquired a trio of the type in Europe. However, he was unable to raise further funding to prepare and ferry them before the Republic fell.

On the opposite axis, SEAT would rather fly airframe and engines into the ground than repair them. One of its Skymasters (N32AC) was nixed in Manila in November 1973.

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**DOUGLAS DC-4 / C-54 SKYMASTER**

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<th>Reg.</th>
<th>From</th>
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<th>Event</th>
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<tr>
<td>N99912</td>
<td>XU-LA</td>
<td>Khmer FA</td>
<td>sold</td>
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**Table Notes:**

- **Reg.** Registration number.
- **From** Source of aircraft.
- **To** Destination.
- **Event** Details of events or changes in ownership.

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*These aircraft were involved in various events during the period of the Khmer Rouge regime.*

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*Two additional DC-4s are shown in photos on the Phnom Penh ramp in unidentified livery. Surroundings and condition suggest they were active in the airlift, if only for a short period in late 1974 and early 1975. **CHINA AIRLINES** (CAL) related its DC-4s during lease to Air Cambodge.*
not only receiving attention but also loading DC-3 engines and spares (from Stan Booker’s Philippine interests) for their counterparts back in the Republic. When this source ran dry, some DC-3s (including N822AC and N821AC) began to appear at the Hong Kong Aircraft Engineering Company (HAECO) at Kai Tak early in 1974 for much-needed attention. However, as word spread this move was short-lived.

Further additions to the apron landscape included the impressive-sounding Cambodia Air International, though it had only a sole DC-3 (N150D) leased from International Air; the illustrious Hang Maus with the short-leased C-46 (N9750E), some DC-3s and a leased Beech 19-20 (N648CF); and the Thai-connected Kang Chak, also with DC-3 XW-1FL.

In this tense and dangerous operational theatre, competitive aggression abounded. Evidence of direct sabotage has never come to light, but the theft of spares and repaired items did. Some public servants were even prepared to siphon off selected contracts from their employer (Air Cambridge) for a share of the action elsewhere.

Others took a more direct approach and began operating in competition. These included a crew hired to fly a DC-4 for a disgruntled SEAAI investor who started his own operation under the name Hunuman (Monkey God or ‘Sah Maw Kong’) Airlines (HAL) whose logo was a dancing image of the latter.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>DOUGLAS DC-6A/B AND DC-7B</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N54CA (-6) 44428 Bird Air (Singapore) escaped to Saigon Pte</td>
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<td>N27CA (-6) 43845 Bird Air (Singapore) escaped to Saigon Pte</td>
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<td>XU-1AJ (-6) 45109 Air Cambridge wtu and sold 1974</td>
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<tr>
<td>N746 (7) 44868 Batair Inc Ltd to Air Cambridge 1973</td>
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Not unexpectedly, the company had only a limited reign. Impossible as it was, SEAAI was far too experienced in the field and was a hard act to beat. The DC-4 in question (XW-FK10) had recently arrived from England, ferried out by ‘Big Steve’ Stevens, a character straight out of ‘Thinestown’.

One small operator was Kompuch Airways, which leased DC-3s, including N9071S with links to Booker’s International Air. The more sober-sounding Cambodian took a Reid each way commencing a lease on Lao Air Development (LAD) Beech Twin Bonanza N9316V, and then added leased Winner DC-3 B-26L, while ‘Stealth’ Wotron’s Cambodian Air Services (CAS) was a busy DC-3 and Convair Liner operator, one of the few lucky enough to last the course, albeit with a sole Convair at the finish.

The authorised Khmer Airlines operated Convair Liners early on for the regional service to Singapore and to Battambang. These were US-registered examples leased from Jim Ziegler, and included the personalised pair N999ZJ, N999ZK, and N62330 with N102KA, all previously withdrawn from Khmer Aks operations. A their running costs mounted (spares and thirsty R-2600s) they were returned to Ziegler, who readily found other customers in Angkor Wat, and newcomer Angkor International. Khmer Airlines went back to operating a DC-3 fleet, which included the former Taiwanese examples B-311 and B-817, plus six locally-registered DC-3s, including XU-CAF (complete with ‘Viewmaster’ windows).

Golden era-re-invented

The civil apron at Pochentong frequently resembled a busy airport of the early 1950s, with DC-3s, Skymasters, Commandos, Convairs, and DC-6s parked every day of the week. The tails of DC-3s and Skymasters could be seen protruding from small hangars aside. interspersed with all this was scheduled regional traffic from Bangkok, Vientiane, (Royal Air Lao and Air Cambodia), Singapore (Air Cambodia), Saigon (Royal Air Lao and Air Vietnam) and Hong Kong (Royal Air Lao). With DC-4s and Lockheed L-188 Electras and, to a lesser extent, C-46, though Viscounts replaced the Electras later on. Air Cambodia also flew this prime regional service with DC-6B XU-1AJ, and later with another Caravelle, XU-JTB.

Air France/UTA had a joint twice-weekly Boeing 707 schedule to Paris from Phnom Penh on its Hong Kong route operated by equipment supplied by the former. In 1972, Air Cambodia had attempted a European connection using a leased Belgian Boeing 720, but was unable to sustain it for long.

Cambodian Air Services CV-440 N102KA at Bangkok after the company withdrew from operations at Phnom Penh in April 1975. This aircraft survives today in a theme park in the Thai capital. AUTHOR’S COLLECTION

The sole Air Cambodge DC-7B N746R was stored at Bangkok after the fall of the Khmer Republic. AUTHOR’S COLLECTION
"ALSO HERE WAS THE SOLE CARVAIR KNOWN AS THE 'POLISH 747'..."

Later on, the ramp housed the Boeing SA-307 Stratoliner the DC-7B, a classic trio in the form of Lockheed Lodestar N513S and converted Beech AT-11 XW-THS. Also here was the sole Carvair (N33AC) known as the ‘Polish 747’, late of Australia, introduced to satisfy cargo demand. It was so-called because of its above-the-crew-deck cockpit, designed to allow for the straight-in loading of cars and bulky freight. There were other British imports (this time in the form of Handley Page Herald B-2011 (operated by FEAT for Air Cambodia when their leased Fokker E2.7 Friendship was recalled by Semaphor, and Viscount 768D XU-LAM, which was operationally restricted (domestically) to the Pocheintong-Battambang route. All this highlighting just a glimpse of the variety.

'The right stuff' Khmer-style

An interesting vignette comes from veteran pilot William Ernst, who flew DC-3s, DC-4s and Convairs for SEAT, mostly during their lease to Air Cambodia. He tells of flying the converted AT-11 XW-THS (leased at that time from Indian Airlines by a 'Dragon Lady' (Chinese 'Mama-san') trading as Phnom Penh Airways, to obtain further command experience. Ernst usually flew the Beech to remote strips in-country such as Pailin and Takeo. A trip for 'Capt-I-Tan' Ernst, however, was scheduled by 'Mama-san' to Prey Veng, an airstrip with which he was not familiar. Asking around the ground crew, it appeared nobody had been there:

'I went over to the coffee shop where the pilots hung out, to dig out some info on the strip. A pilot that could be found there possessed a handy notebook on airstrips in the region, which would surely have the info if he was around! He was and it did! Prey Veng, closed, unfriendly! It wasn't that Prey Veng itself was unfriendly, just the surrounding area, was the consensus at the coffee shop! I guess it wouldn't hurt to have a look, as the sweet 'Mama-san' had mentioned there was ‘beaucoup’ money to be made there.

'After all, having sorted out the wobble pump, non-feathering props and 1941 Ford braking system, what more could give me stress? I had grown fond of the Beech - it had taught me how fast I could get out of the cockpit to extinguish a carburettor fire, how to perform the gentle art of a ground loop, and a lot about weight and balance when the tail would not come up.

Coming high over the Prey Veng airfield, descending in a series of figure eights to avoid any ground fire, I finally got it on the ground. However, the fun started when, amid gunfire in the near vicinity, I was asked by a soldier from an apron bunker if I had a landing permit. I was only supposed to have 800kg. (no wonder I needed climb power to taxi out) but even under fire it took a long time to unload the Beech. It was time to get out of there!

The troops promised me counter-fire as I took off, but I’d better be quick before the bad guys replied! That was the first and last trip to Prey Veng. I was happy to endorse a Chinese pilot ‘Mama-san’ had found, but a few weeks into it he couldn’t get the gear down, and so he landed it the other way and there she stayed. Sadly, ‘Mama-san’s’ rising career as an airline executive folded at the same time. I was content to return to pushing flap and dropping Dunlops on the big ones!"

"THE TROOPS PROMISED ME COUNTER-FIRE AS I TOOK OFF, BUT I’D BETTER BE QUICK BEFORE THE BAD GUYS REPLIED!"

As may be deduced, it paid not to take one’s job too seriously and to get through the bad days tongue-in-cheek. (Air America aircraft drawn from Saigon, a mix of Volpas Turboliners, C-47s or DHC Caribou, appeared at Phnom Penh mainly to re-supply the US Embassy and Air Attaché, and never ventured into the cut-and-thrust of the cargo business of the rural sector, which would prove too visible for comfort). The USAF flew regular Lockheed C-130 Hercules shuttles into Pocheintong from Thailand with ammunition. However, itinerant USAF VIP aircraft often completed a full-stop landing at Pocheintong to ‘qualify’ for combat pay! This 'unofficial' exercise required a certain number of minutes on the 'active', which in Pocheintong's case, blocked the sole runway for that period of time, interrupting regular arrivals and departures - all for an unearned bonus, much to the disgust of the 'Angels'.

Concludes in Air Enthusiast 121 - the January/February 2006 issue - published on December 22.
A NUMBER OF COMPANIES who operated during the airlift flew their charges on the edge of safety, and furthermore in an overweight condition, a situation that could lead to fatal consequences. While many of these weary veterans may well have been past their use-by date, they were quite capable of hauling freight, cargo and refugees over short distances within the country, providing there were some spares on their company shelf and that the aircraft was operated and maintained to a reasonable level. Sadly, this was not always the case in either instance, and there were a number of incidents and write-offs. Usually attributed to one or both sources, these were inevitably aggravated by overloading. The culture was widespread and dangerous, the art having been perfected by the merchants and their agents.

As the most prolific 'Angel' in service, the DC-3 was particularly vulnerable because of its payload limits and power reserve compared to the Convair and Skymaster, though both the latter types were victims of the same scam. A survey in September 1974 reveals the losses in DC-3 terms of one Scorya example (XW-PKT), a pair from Khmer Airlines (XW-PKD, XW-PKX), CAI's sole example (N150D) and two from CAC (XW-PKY, XW-PHY).

A former Pochehtong engineer recollects that close-up observation of several leased DC-3s and Convairs confirmed the serviceability of many as highly suspect - they were running on the proverbial 'whiff of an oil-soaked rag'. He added that it was not beyond the realms of possibility that few - if any - carried insurance and that only a 'mechanic'
was employed to actually ‘service’ them. It was more than likely that a signature substituted for the actual periodic check, while the few experienced hands around were busy trying to keep the Convair Liners in the air.

Fuel ‘royalty’

Apart from these problems, the shadow of corruption was falling on the vital area of fuel supply. The Government’s transport minister, who authorised the monthly quotas, could make it very obvious that if he did not receive his pre-selected ‘gift’, an operator could expect a delay of several days in obtaining his fuel allowance. This forced suppliers to square this ‘request’ fairly promptly or no-one in the loop would get any ‘pie’ and nothing would move – it all went round in a circle. In the middle of 1974, fuel supplies again became critical while ‘deals’ were made to rectify shortages. Ongoing theft in the form of draining did not help matters. To make up for this additional ministerial ‘expense’ and delay, pressure was on the agents to force the operators to uplift more than was legally listed on the manifests.

Refusal to accede would lead to continuing arguments, threats and cancellations. However, the word always spread, especially in the case of cancellations, as to the reason why, and more often than not the agents had to accept what the crew could legally uplift, which was always less than the agents’ own – unrealistic – expectations. The sight of a Skymaster, the generous C-46 or the sole Carvair appearing after a DC-3 could raise imagination to new heights as to what they would try to consign on these aircraft.

(Interestingly, when the shippers discovered the role for which the Carvair was developed – a car ferry – they attempted to use it for that purpose, despite its having no loading platforms. They assembled an ingenious method to overcome this shortcoming, using a truck and two sets of planks, one set from the ground to the tray, and the second from the tray and over the cabin to the door lip, and succeeded in loading a Renault. However, they did not persevere with cargo of this nature).
**Airliners and Air Services**

**Fortune favours the brave**

With the above maxim in mind, further DC-3s, C-46s and DC-4 continued to surface, filling the void and appearing to thrive. As the months passed, it was interesting to note a seemingly-endless selection of liveries and colloquial titles. These included Indamou (Rainbow Airlines) which flew a sole Lodestar and was renowned for landing in the main streets of the few towns straddling the Republic's section of the Gulf of Thailand shore; it operated a Beech AT-11 in a similar fashion. The main traffic route to and from Battambang was oversubscribed, mainly because larger aircraft could use it unrestricted, and it was the closest centre for the sole – and vital, even though irregular – surface connection to the Thai border. Consequently, Battambang and Kompong Som, further south, were busy maintaining the essential daily shuttles of fuel drums, though the latter port also provided a range of imported goods to be transported to Phnom Penh.

There were other centres just as capable of offering the lure (should one be needed) of a full payload when an aircraft dropped in. In most instances, the aircraft of choice was the prolific and rugged DC-3; it was perfect for the task at hand, was found in abundance and could land virtually anywhere in the Republic. It could be kept airworthy with simple maintenance, and spares were plentiful – if the owner was prepared to purchase them. Several of Stan Booker’s crew had been involved in a number of dangerous handling incidents, one at Kampot and another which resulted in the write-off of Kang Chai’s DC-3 at Svy Rieng. Stan finally gave it away in the Republic, to surface elsewhere, (which he did as Nevada Airlines, operating flights to the Grand Canyon from California with Beech 19s and an ill-fated Martin 404-4, before ‘buying the farm’ in a Lodestar crash in New York state). For this ‘Captain’, whose favourite jingle ran ‘I love the feel of Riel’, it must have been a bitter pill to swallow.

Another unforgivable crash, attributed in part to overloading, afflicted CAC’s ‘Jimmy’ Lao (ex-Chinese nationalist Air Force), who continued a second take-off at Battambang in CAC’s Stratoliner XW-TPI after his co-pilot had refused to continue at the first attempt. The aircraft progressively lost power in three engines after rotating, and control was lost. In the subsequent report, ‘excessive’ weight was found to be a contributing factor. The aircraft had passed the 43,742-hour mark a few months earlier. This incident led to the suspension of CAC’s licence and the company never recovered. Ironically, one of the survivors of the crash was a Kim Ngan C Lam, the Director of CAC. A ‘contract’ was put out on ‘Jimmy’ by the family of one of the crash victims, a wealthy Chinese Taipan, and the pilot had to leave the Republic. He joined neighbouring Royal Air Lao, but matters did not end there.

The following March, ‘Jimmy’ was the Captain on the former CAC Stratoliner, which was being flown by Royal Air Lao (XW-TPI) following CAC’s collapse. It force-landed in a creek bed off the nearby Mekong River outside Takeo, and he was captured by the Father Lao. They kept him interned until Laos fell in 1975. Ironically, this probably saved him from some serious family payback.

On the other hand, John Yin of TRI-9, fought the overloading with some success by employing Khmer loadmasters, whose sole purpose was to monitor the payload. He backed this up by insisting on up-front payment from a shipper for two or more flights, with one trip always in credit; any discrepancies rolled over from the previous flight would be deducted accordingly.

**Self-inflicted loss and hostile fire**

The continued overloading resulted in a series of accidents that were totally preventable. Several had proved beyond doubt that overloading had been a contributory cause to loss of control, where power failure had occurred either on or after take-off. This compounded the additional daily stress of dodging the 60 to 90 rounds (on average) of random 105mm howitzer artillery and 122mm rockets in both the take-off and landing phases at Pochentong.

As a number of US-registered aircraft were vitally active in the Khmer Republic, a one-day audit because the Entry Permit was only validated for a day visit for the American, FAA was performed during 1974 at Phnom Penh by one of its own aviation safety representatives, who was escorted by the US Air Attaché from the embassy there. The subsequent ‘report’ found much of concern regarding the whole spectrum of flying operations in the Republic. However, any attempt to initiate grounding action was likely to cripple the airlift.

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*Top Left in the 1950s, following Bird of Bird and Sons began operating again under his name, this time as Bird Air, incorporated in Singapore, with a trio of DC-6A/Bo, loading at Vientiane in LW77CA.*

*Author’s Collection*

*Above: Boeing 3A-307 XW-TPI of Cambodia Air Commercial still wearing the former Air Laos lightening bolt, chart 1973.*

*GAIL HAUER*

*Air Cambridge-based DC-4 B-1553 from CAL, but the aircraft was abandoned at Pochentong in April 1975, following damage incurred in a mid-air collision.*

*Ben Crawford*
and also endanger those involved in the day-to-day discharge of the operations of the pilots who flew US-registered aircraft in such conditions. Up to this point there had been no loss of an American pilot, which could be attributed to loading or maintenance, though it was only a matter of time—there were plenty of weeks strewn around the country's airfields to support this. Hostile fire, however, was another matter.

Pochentong, alone was the subject of this brief visit, the auditor unable (or unwilling) to witness what might be construed as "operations" in force up-country. It was a "quid pro quo" result, with 'permanent dispersion until further notice' as the onlycommon sense solution open to a reluctant FAA if the lift was to remain airborne. Following the visit, though, a local pilots' association was formed, named the 'Phnom Penh Pigeons Pilots Association' (PPPA).
mainly because as its founder stated, “it rolled off the tongue nicely”. However, all its members had to confirm that at some time they had uplifted a ‘pioneer’ - not a difficult task in this theatre. The serious brief of the PIPPA however, was to discuss and organise better ways to conduct safer flying operations in the war-torn Republic; such as separation procedures, a strategy for identifying and pinpointing ground and rocket fire near Pochentong, and establishing secure landing and take-off paths.

The continuous distribution of such information was deemed a priority. The subsequent revised arrival and departure rules for Pochentong instigated by the PIPPA were a vast improvement on the old ones. Not long afterwards, another association sprang up to look after the interests of the substantial numbers of Chinese pilots endorsed to fly in the Khmer Republic - the Overseas Chinese Pilots Association.

An old hand returned to Phnom Penh in September 1974 when the ‘revived’ Bird Air (SIN) Pte, recommenced fixed wing operations in the region after some eight years absence, flying a trio of DC-6A/Bs. Two of the ‘Sixes’ were converted to cargo and began regular shuttles into Pochentong from Singapore, Bangkok and U-Tapao. With Air America still too visible, Bird Air was contracted to replace the USAF’s daily munitions shuttles, using several former USAF C-130s ‘sanitised’ for the mission.

Deteriorating situation
As 1975 began, the general security appraisal of the country was tenuous. The Lon Nol government was losing the battle, compounded by inefficiency and lack of support for its troops, while US Senate voted to halt the aid designated for the Khmer Republic, a move that was followed by the expected accusations of once again abandoning their SEA allies. On the other side, an increase in supplies for the KR enabled them to make continued progress in their struggle for dominance.

By February, the vital Measong River link to the capital was permanently blockaded. This put the airlift in the last option category, and with it came the exasperation that the KR were almost on the city outskirts. Fuel supplies were scarce again subsidies had evaporated, but Bird Air increased its C-130 supply shuttles to 13 a day. Meanwhile, the ‘Captains’ (survivors if ever) once again put on their thinking caps and considered a plan to use Lockheed 1649 Starliners to shuttle fuel into the Republic from Thailand. The extensive tankage of these retired ultra long-haul airliners was capable of uplifting enormous quantities of bunkeried Avgas. The Khmer Republic fell before any contracts could be signed.

The route was moving so swiftly that a potential new ‘Angel’ landed belatedly at Bangkok en route to Pochentong in May 1975. This was another Carvair (LN-NAA), operated by the International Red Cross, which arrived too late to make any contribution to the situation and was forced to sit it all out in Bangkok. By March, the ‘Angels’ remaining in-country never realistically recovered from the losses of the previous two months, coupled with a continuing litany of ramp casualties suffered by accurate ‘incoming’ fire. Nevertheless, pilots who were still able attempted to fly the surviving aircraft, despite their condition. It was a case of desperation, with ‘hot’ turnarounds a regular occurrence. Rural strips were now as dangerous as Pochentong, with mortar fire and 37mm the greatest threat. This was experienced at Kampot, Kompong Chom, Kompong Thom and Kompong Chhnang, and caused hits to two separate Air Cambridge DC-3s. Many of the R-1830 powerplants used in the ‘Angels’ DC-3s were now way out of Time Between Overhaul, spare parts were overpriced and sparse, and replacement parts such as tyres almost non-existent. All in all, it was a 'last gasp' scenario - even the mechanics had fled.
Flying exodus
After the loss of the Mekong access, the flight of head of state Lon Nol in Air Cambodge’s sole Caravelle on April 1, followed by the US Ambassador courtesy of AAM, spoke for everyone. The trickle of departing residents became a flood as the regional services filled to overflowing with escapees who could read the writing on the wall. When the capacity was filled, cargo aircraft seized the opportunity to evacuate them. However, among all this pandemonium some cool heads prevailed. One arriving passenger wrote in a report that sensing the imminent fall of the capital from newspaper reports he read in Bangkok, where he was employed, he travelled back to Pochentong to rescue his family.

He flew on Air Cambodia’s sole DC-7B, which operated Bangkok - Phnom Penh - Bangkok shuttles alongside a company DC-4 in the final weeks. Although the DC-7B was seen flying on three of its four engines after being hit by shrapnel on an earlier take-off from Pochentong, it continued to operate in that condition with little noticeable effect on the flight, or from the few passengers travelling in that direction. Furthermore, his report stated that a cabin attendant called Saksi Sbong continued to offer excellent service, serving champagne until their arrival at a ‘very hot’ apron at Pochentong. In the same condition, the aircraft returned to Bangkok, and continued to shuttle to and from Pochentong (presumably after repairs) almost to the moment the airport was closed. It was stored at Bangkok for a number of years after the fall.

Final chapter
In February 1975, a total last-ditch effort was made in the remaining two months before the collapse. The reduced USAID for the Republic was flown out of Saigon by seven stretched DC-8-63CFs of the US supplementary carriers Flying Tiger, Airlift International, Trans International (TIA), and World Airways, when possible on daylight shuttles to Pochentong at 30-minute intervals. The airport was now under near-continuous attack, damage to its taxiways and runway being repaired on the spot by re-laying crushed rock once an attack subsided. This went on until the week the Republic fell, when Pochentong was overrun and all air movements halted.

In those last weeks and days, the build-up to an expected mass evacuation took place of, amongst others, Air Cambodge’s DC-7B, one DC-4 and a Convair, plus a sole CAS Convair all to Thailand, whilst TR-9’s remaining Convairs, and Golden Eagle’s pair of DC-3’s headed for Singapore. By April 4, airport staff were pulling out. The KR were in the city limits by April 6. As they progressed towards the airport on April 11-12, fierce and accurate barrages of MRL, the virtually destroyed those ‘Angels’ on the civil ramp, which had been unable to fly out due to lack of crew or fuel, or because of unserviceability. These included three Convairs (N103KA, NS7914 and XW-FJY), up to four (partly) engineless DC-4s (XW-FSB, N34AC, B-1803, N90895), probably more than four DC-3s (including N82AC, N83AC, N88750, N9071S) and the Carvair N33AC.

Photographs show several more DC-3 and Convair remnants lying around the ramp, but it is probable they were already casualties of hostile shelling in the weeks and days leading up to this. The unlucky Convair had that fatal week been stranded in Kompong Som with an unserviceable engine (a similar situation befall a TR-9 Convair abandoned there some time previously) and could have been saved by flying out of the country. However, when no replacement was forthcoming, its crew flew back to Pochentong on three but, without the luck that held in the case of the company DC-7B, N33AC lost a further engine, arriving on two. There were no spares or mechanics on hand at Pochentong and the Carvair could not escape. Its forward fuselage finished up on the dump at the military side of the airport until it was noted in the early 1980s. It then disappeared along with other airframes, possibly used as shelter by the many homeless outside the airfield perimeters.

The KR eventually overran the centre of Phnom Penh on April 16, and no further arrivals at Pochentong were recorded. Most of the loyal airport staff that remained perished in the bloodbath that followed occupation. Bird Air C-130s continued to air drop supplies in the area until early the following day, April 17, when the situation was no longer in doubt.

After the collapse
After the fall of the Khmer Republic, many of the aircraft that escaped were seized by creditors: some never flew – or moved – again, or else were scrapped where they stood. The few of those without liens were too far deteriorated to ever fly again without expensive overhaul, and ended up as restaurants or in theme parks. The ‘Pig Pilots’ departed the Republic – most of them with no financial reward, simply the satisfaction of knowing that they had made a difference to the Khmer people’s survival during the period of the airlift. Some re-started their flying careers with airlines a world away from their experiences in the Khmer Republic. The ‘Captains of Industry’ vanished, although it is reported that a number of them were eventually traced and confronted by their many creditors, who were once again staved off with the familiar tales of more deals just about to be signed – “Your cheque is in the mail”!

By the end of that April, South Vietnam had also fallen, and later in the year, Laos, the final domino in the game, capitulated, bringing the end of Indochina.

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