



**Jan K. Herman.** *The Lucky Few: The Fall of Saigon and the Rescue Mission of the USS Kirk.* Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2013. Illustrations. 192 pp. \$21.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-61251-894-7.

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One of the iconic images of the Vietnam War remains helicopters evacuating refugees from Saigon rooftops as South Vietnam collapsed. Those aircraft carried thousands to a flotilla of US naval vessels offshore, including the destroyer escort USS *Kirk*. In *The Lucky Few*, US Navy historian Jan K. Herman provides an overview of this ship's role in the evacuation and subsequent mission escorting former South Vietnamese vessels to the Philippines. Drawn from a series of interviews and oral histories, the project grew out of his work on a Naval Historical Center oral history compilation that ultimately led to an hour-long documentary on the *Kirk* and its crew. This book represents the far broader story that could not be fully told in the confines of that video.

The rapid collapse of South Vietnam forced the United States to execute an evacuation plan in days rather than weeks. The organized effort of US helicopters was soon overwhelmed by hundreds of boats and aircraft full of panicked southerners escaping the North Vietnamese. The decks of the US carriers and amphibious warfare ships could not keep up with flow, even after shoving the landed aircraft into the sea. The *Kirk's* helicopter pad became the destination for over a dozen helicopters, including a giant two-rotor Chinook that, although too big to land, hovered over the fantail discharging passengers before ditching in the sea.

Even the crew of a US Marine Cobra gunship, which covered the evacuation, owed its rescue to the *Kirk's* crew when it ran out of fuel and crashed nearby.

Taking part in the airlift was taxing, but the ship and crew soon found themselves on an even more important mission: preventing the remaining South Vietnamese naval vessels from falling into communist hands. Richard Armitage, a civilian operative within the navy department, hatched a plan for their escape. Armitage returned to South Vietnam to both destroy sensitive equipment and orchestrate the withdrawal with his South Vietnamese navy counterparts. Over thirty South Vietnamese ships, packed with over thirty thousand refugees, rendezvoused with US forces near Con Tien Island. The *Kirk* was one of a dozen American vessels tasked with escorting them one thousand miles to the Philippines. Many of the ships were barely seaworthy, and lacked necessary food, water, and medical supplies. Navy corpsmen provided medical care on site and evacuated the worst cases. Landing parties tried to provide security amid gangs that controlled access to food and water and to improve sanitation. Engineers kept the ships moving. The international complexity became apparent when the Philippines initially refused the ships, warships from a country that no longer existed, and their human

cargo. In a diplomatic sleight of hand, the ships were transferred back to the US Navy and then given to the Philippines. The refugees, after receiving care at US facilities, would be transported to the United States.

Although ostensibly about the crew of the *Kirk*, the book does not neglect Vietnamese voices: from helicopter pilots to refugees who evaded North Vietnamese forces and bribed, bluffed, or fought their way onto aircraft or boats to reach the Americans. Herman captures their anguish as South Vietnamese flags were lowered for the last time. He follows the stories of some of those who found refuge on the *Kirk* and highlights their lives after the war.

While not a comprehensive history, the book provides an eyewitness perspective on the humanitarian crisis surrounding the fall of Saigon. Herman focuses on the contributions of the entire crew, not just officers and officials, during the most trying week of their deployment. Drawing on numerous interviews as well as official sources, the author weaves a compelling narrative that adds to our understanding of the fall of South Vietnam as experienced by the *Kirk*'s crew.

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