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Long Island

A deadly crash got the world watching

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Operation Babylift flashed to the world's attention 30 years ago with a terrible image: the smoldering wreckage of a U.S. C5-A cargo plane in a rice field near Saigon.

Minutes after it took off on April 4, 1975, with 243 orphans jammed inside, the giant jet's rear door blew out.

The blowout severed key control wires, making the plane unflyable. In efforts that earned him a medal for "extraordinary heroism and airmanship," the pilot managed to bank the crippled craft into a relatively gentle crash landing.

Nevertheless, the disaster's death toll was 138, most of them children.

"It was an awful thing, but I don't feel responsible for those who died," Dennis "Bud" Traynor -- the pilot, then a young Air Force captain, now a retired colonel -- said in a phone interview from

his Virginia home. "I feel responsible for the 176 people who were saved."

Traynor, 61, added: "The strongest emotion I have about that incident is pride. We took the best possible care of that precious cargo."

Nevertheless, the entire airlift remains a source of controversy.

Although he received no medals, for example, some observers also considered pilot Ken Healy a hero for his actions two days earlier.

As he prepared to fly his World Airways DC-8 into the night sky over Saigon, Healy ignored the fact that officials at Tan Son Nhut airport had turned off the runway lights. He also pretended not to hear an air-traffic controller's urgently radioed command: "Don't take off, don't take off. You have no clearance."

Although unauthorized, his flight, which brought 57 South Vietnamese orphans to the United States, was widely considered the catalyst that forced President Gerald Ford to announce the official start of Operation Babylift the following day.

Healy, now 89 and long retired, laughed when recounting the incident in a phone interview from his California home.

"They gave us some cock-and-bull story about Viet Cong infiltrators," he said of the airport authorities trying to stop the take-off. "Well, if that was true, it was all the more reason for us to get the hell out of there."

In an emotional meeting several hours earlier, according to participants, American embassy officials also tried to discourage the World flight. They claimed the cargo plane was not fit to carry people, because it lacked lavatories, heaters and seats.

"They were full of -- --," Healy asserted. "It did have lavatories, and heaters were not needed because hot air from the engines was used to keep the interior warm. True, it didn't have seats, but was that a reason not to evacuate the children?"

The pilot added: "The bottom line clearly was politics. Embassy officials were more concerned with the morale of our South Vietnamese allies than saving the lives of those kids."

A World Airways flight attendant at the meeting could barely control her rage and frustration.



"It was so hard to watch these people flat-out lie to us for obviously political reasons," said Jan Wollett, 64, now a catering supervisor in Oregon. "And this was our own government."

As embassy officials ended the meeting, one of the participants, Ross Meador, Saigon office manager for an American adoption agency, received a phone call from Ed Daly, the owner of World Airways.

"He was at the airport, and he said his plane would go if I put my kids aboard," recalled Meador, now a 50-year-old attorney in California. "I had heard the U.S. government was planning to eventually airlift the kids out, but that was just talk and this was a chance to actually do it. I said yes."

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