

Civilians risk own lives in evacuation maneuver

By ANNE WHEELER

As despicable as events in the Vietnam war became, even that war produced some happy endings. "Last Flight Out," airing Tuesday, May 20, on NBC, tells the true story of a brave group of people who risked their lives to evacuate others just before the fall of Saigon.

James Earl Jones and Richard Crenna portray American Pan Am employees who organized their own unofficial, separate evacuation efforts, but combined them to help 463 Vietnam nationals escape certain death at the hands of the communist Khmer Rouge.

Jones plays Allan H. Topping, the director in charge of operations in South Vietnam who was organizing the evacuation of Pan Am employees and their immediate families. It proved a bittersweet task, since Vietnamese include any relative as an immediate family member, so more people wanted to leave than room allowed.

"The process took place by reducing the numbers to immediate families, basically people living within the same household: mother, father, sister, brother, and in some cases, grandmothers," Topping explained. "That was a very difficult process because people were aware of the fact that Saigon was deteriorating rapidly, and they wanted a way out."

A happier ending brought about by the evacuation, however, was the story of Dan Hood, who piloted the plane safely to the Philippines.

Hood had personal reasons for riding the last plane into the country, but had no intention of piloting the craft out of Vietnam. He had gone to Saigon at the request of a former classmate, a doctor who was caring for children of an orphanage injured earlier in an airplane accident. Hood was to help take the children to Medivac planes so they could leave the country. He was able to help many, but many were left behind.

"We were on the airplanes, we were taxiing out of Saigon, and all I could think of is all those little kids that we left behind, who didn't have a chance — half-American, half-

Vietnamese — who are shunned by their own society over there. And I wish I could have done more. And that stuck with me all these years," Hood said.

Hood made quite a change in the life of one of those children, however — he adopted a little boy. Now 20, Hood's son was not quite 5 during the evacuation. Hood said he has spoken with the boy's mother twice since that day in 1975.

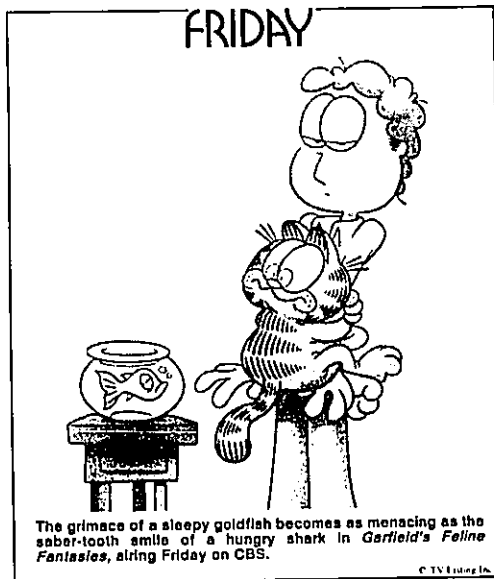
"The Vietnamese had a tremendous underground pipeline of communication, and she was able to get a letter out to me through France, and all she wanted to know was, 'was her son OK, and what was his situation?'" Hood said. Then he got another letter in 1985. "I received another letter just requesting a picture and wanting to know if he was OK, which — I sent a picture back and told her that he was doing just fine."



Michael Douglas plays Gordon Gekko, a corporate raider, in *Wall Street*, Wednesday on FOX.



New Orleans Officer Desiree Gaudet patrols during Mardi Gras in *COPS*, Saturday on FOX.



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