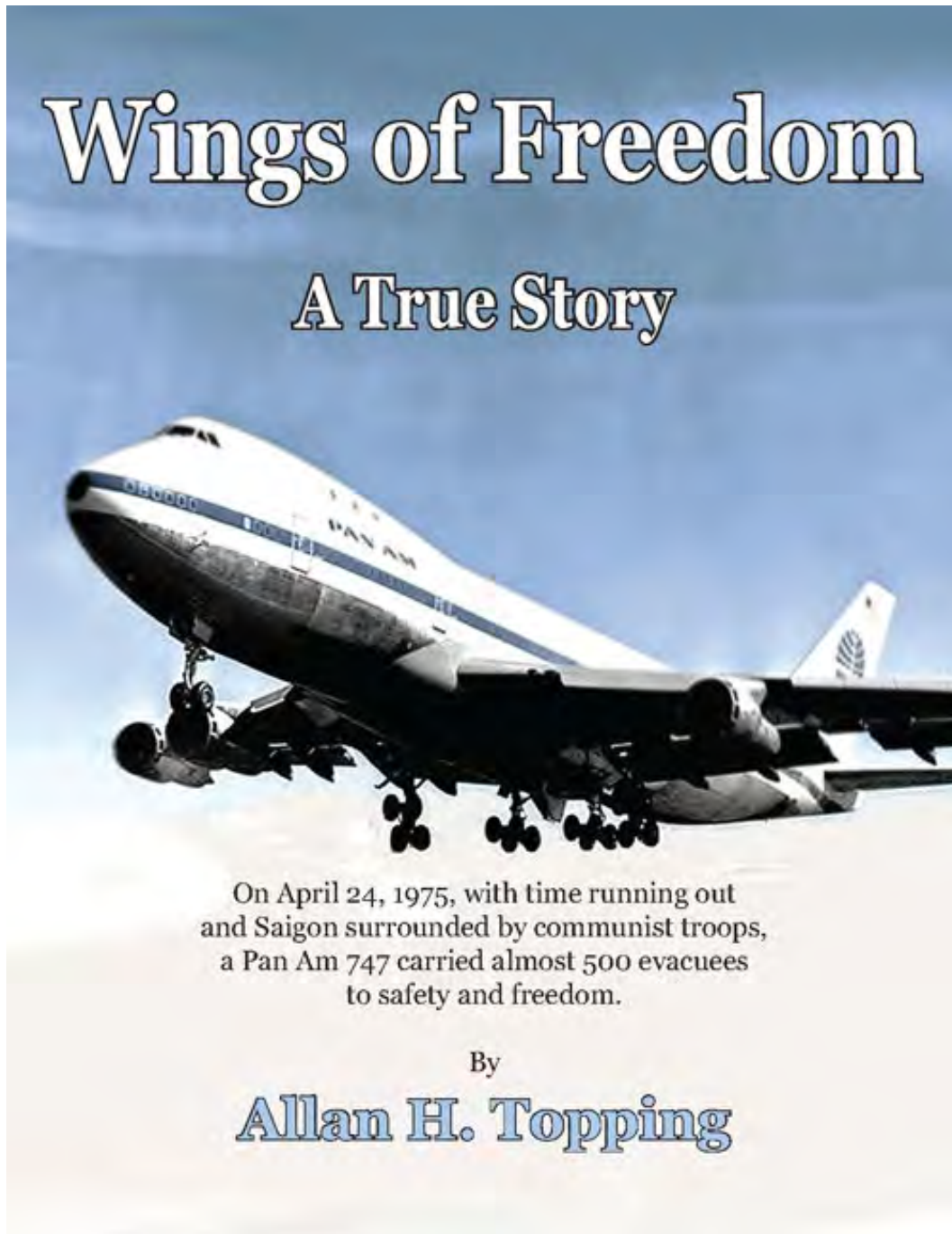


“Wings of Freedom” by Al Topping



Thanks to Al Topping, here is a pre-publication chapter from his forthcoming book, “Wings of Freedom”!

Pre-Publication Chapter: “Assignment Vietnam”

I began my Pan Am career in June of 1969. During the course of the orientation I was most impressed with the history of Pan Am. The airline was a true pioneer in commercial international aviation.

After about four to six weeks of orientation and an accelerated management training program, I was told that I would be transferred to a Pan Am sales office in the United States. As the new kid on the block, I expected to be assigned to an off-line city.

Off-line cities are locations where the airline does not operate and you are expected to generate revenue, via airline partners and travel agents, that would feed passengers into our major New York hub. This sales approach was a challenge simply because there was no way to board a Pan Am flight in an off-line city. In an off-line city, it would be necessary to create incentive programs to get travel agents to book passengers on Pan Am, via an intermediate stop on another airline. This was back in the day when travel agents were responsible for booking more than 50% of an airline's revenue. Those were indeed the good old days of travel. But today, due to the internet, travel agents are becoming the dinosaur of the industry. Now there are many websites available where travelers can easily make their own airline, hotel, car rental, and sight seeing tour reservations. In fact, today passengers can even print out their boarding passes from their home computer. That was unheard of in those days.

After a couple of weeks of orientation and management training, I received word that I was going to be a sales rep in the Northern California Sales Office and that I could begin planning my move to San Francisco. I was asked, “Is that okay with you, Al?” Once I started breathing again I replied, “Are you kidding me? That’s wonderful!” It was like a dream coming to life.



Pan Am Ad, 1968 (PAHF Collection)

A new beginning in the Bay Area was really the best of both worlds. The morning commute to the City on the Sausalito Ferry was the best way to get to work. There was no rush-hour traffic to deal with; I just sat back with a cup of coffee and opened the San Francisco Chronicle to

catch up with the news of the day as we sailed passed the infamous Alcatraz Island prison. A short twenty-five minutes later the ferry docked at The Ferry Building in San Francisco and from there I had a short walk to the office at Number One California Street.



After a couple of years as a sales rep I was offered the job as Manager of Telephone Sales in the reservations office. It was a challenging and important position. The Reservations Sale Agent was often the first contact a customer had with the company. If professional and courteous service was not provided when handling a sales call, we could have easily lost a customer to the competition. This was an issue I constantly emphasized to our sales agents.

Bill Cowden told me he was going to be reassigned to Hong Kong and that I would be reporting to him. At this point I'm wondering, "Could this be Hawaii, (not a chance), Hong Kong, Singapore, Thailand, or perhaps Australia or the Philippines?" Bill told me that I would be the country director and the official Pan Am representative. "Terrific," I said, "What country is it?"

He said, "You would be the Director for our operations in South Vietnam and Cambodia and based in Saigon." My immediate response was, "Seriously? No thanks, Bill." Leaving the Bay Area to reside in a war zone did not appeal to me at all. He tried to encourage me and told me I didn't have to decide at that moment. He wanted me to take a couple of days to think about it. "After all," he said, "the Paris peace talks are moving along on a positive track. The negotiations are ongoing and there may be a cease-fire agreement soon. While you are thinking about it, perhaps you should take a few days off, get on a plane and take a trip to Saigon. Plan on spending a few days there, meet the Pan Am staff, have a look around and then make a decision." I thought about it overnight and decided that I would make the trip. So, off I went to Saigon, South Vietnam via PA Flight #841.



Pan Am Saigon poster, c. 1959 (PAHF Collection)

After departing Manila, I was getting curious and somewhat excited about actually flying into South Vietnam. Again, I'm looking out the window and I see that we are approaching the coastline of South Vietnam. I had seen and heard so many reports on the evening news about the protracted war. Now I was wondering if I would see any signs of war from the airplane window. As our flight continued toward Saigon, I did see some fighter jets and C-130 type aircraft flying in various directions below us. I also saw what appeared to be bomb craters scattered throughout the countryside. I noticed that we were making a very unusual approach into Tan Son Nhut Airport. Our flight pattern involved a huge circle on the outskirts of Saigon and continued descending into a corkscrew type of pattern, then leveling off into a final approach for landing. I assumed that this was an approach pattern used to minimize the chance of being hit by possible ground fire.

The ride from the airport to the hotel in Saigon was overwhelming. The traffic was a sight to behold. The primary mode of transportation in Saigon was the Honda motorbike, commonly called cyclos. They were noisy and most of them produced an unusual amount of smoke from their faulty exhaust systems.



Vietnamese man on scooter (Al Topping Collection).

As we continued our way to the hotel, I was amazed at the sight of four or five people riding on one motorbike. Some people would have a significant load of products on their motorbike, which they were taking to market or perhaps selling on a street corner. Some of the loads I saw that day included chickens and bundles of various vegetables slung over half the back seat. Interspersed throughout the traffic were three-wheel cyclo-taxis for hire. One of the more beautiful sights, mixed in with all the traffic, was the Vietnamese women wearing their

traditional dress, the Ao Dai (pronounced as “ow zai”), as they sat side saddle on the motorbike with their dresses flowing in the breeze.

The arrival and check-in at the Regency Palace on Nguyen Hue Street was routine. There was nothing special in the lobby; only the usual furnishings that were typical in any hotel. There were, however, a couple of guys in the lobby who were wandering around, puffing on cigarettes, and giving me a curious look. I surmised that they were probably local police officers, in plain clothes, keeping an eye on the foreigners checking in and out of the hotel.

My hotel room was small and the mattress was extra firm and not too comfortable. On the first evening in Saigon we had dinner at the hotel’s rooftop restaurant. The terrain surrounding Saigon is flat and I could see for miles, all the way to the horizon. The rooftop view was spectacular. That evening, the reality of war made its first appearance to me. Off in the distance were flashes of fire, coupled with distinctive booms—the sound of bombs exploding. I said to Bob. “If that is what I think it is, I hope they’re on our side!” He explained that it was pretty much a nightly occurrence, as the South Vietnamese were hitting suspected enemy targets. The practice had been going on for years. I wondered how many people were killed and wounded by the indiscriminate dropping of bombs in the countryside of South Vietnam. A few days later my wondering became a reality. I saw the results of those bombings; mostly women, carrying or walking with their wounded children. Some of their babies were horribly scared for life with severe burns on their faces and other parts of their little bodies. They could be seen throughout the city. As I walked along, I was frequently approached by these mothers, begging for money. It was troubling and very sad. Some cases were so horrific that I could only look for a second or two. I had a difficult time making eye contact with them.

The hotel rooftop restaurant was not the only game in town. There were numerous cafes where one could enjoy any type of Vietnamese cuisine. If someone were looking for fine carpeting and candlelight dining, Saigon was not the place. But if one were looking for delicious and inexpensive food, sidewalk dining was the best option. Sitting on small stools and eating alongside the locals was quite the experience. Sidewalk eating spots were everywhere. The majority of these eateries were frequented by the locals. But for the tourist that was looking to experience the local flavor of Saigon, they would not be disappointed in the delicious, inexpensive and very satisfying meal found at a sidewalk cafe. Due to decades of the French influence in Vietnam, there were a number of good French restaurants as well.

During my one-week stay in Saigon I had an opportunity to tour all of our facilities and meet with all of our employees. Bob also arranged a reception so that I could meet some of the members of the business and diplomatic community. The reception was held at the Pan Am Director’s residence. As I entered the residence for the first time, I was struck by the charm and structure of the classic old French villa. It had eighteen-foot high ceilings, with ceiling fans and tall windows that were open to the warm, humid climate outside. There was no central air conditioning, only turning ceiling fans and open windows all around the room that provided cross ventilation. The only air-conditioned rooms were the master and guest bedrooms.

Window air conditioner units were installed in those room and provided comfortable and adequate cooling.

From a security standpoint the location of the residence was ideal. Directly across the street was the residential compound of the Vice President of South Vietnam. The walled compound had fully armed South Vietnamese soldiers overlooking the neighborhood from their lookout towers. Helicopters were in and out of the compound throughout the day and sometimes into the night. Adjacent to the Vice President's residence was a U.S. Embassy personnel compound, the residence for U.S. diplomats and their families. Our next-door neighbor on one side was the President of Air Vietnam and on the other side was the home of the general manager for Citi Bank—not a bad neighborhood. The name of the street was Tu Xuon (too soon), known as the Quiet Street. So this would be home, should I decide to accept the assignment.

After spending a week in Saigon and meeting the Pan Am employees and those in the business and diplomatic community, it was time to make the long trip back to San Francisco. I knew that it was now decision time. I had lots of time to think about how my life would be impacted if I decided to take the assignment. I was very happy living in the Bay Area. I would miss those weekend trips to places like Lake Tahoe, the wine country in Sonoma and Napa Valley, the Gold Country and spending the night in Jackson, or heading down the Coast to Pebble Beach, Big Sur and the Monterey Bay area. Surely I would miss all of that and more.

More importantly, in North Carolina, was another part of my life that caused me pause in my decision making process. My two children from a previous marriage, Todd and Germaine lived in North Carolina with their mother. At the time Todd was six and Germaine was nine. From California I could get to them rather quickly, as it was only a four and a half-hour flight to North Carolina. Relocating almost 20,000 miles away was indeed a cause for concern. Being so far away made it seem like it would take days to get to North Carolina. This personal family matter added to the clutter of issues gathering in my mind. So much to think about; so little time.

There would be another important part of my California living that I would dearly miss. I would be flying off to Vietnam without Jan. Jan and I had been dating for nearly two years and we had a close and wonderful relationship. Since the relocation was happening so quickly, we decided that I would proceed with the move, get acclimated to my new assignment, and then decide what to do about our relationship. The decision emerged rather quickly; three months later I returned to California and we were married on March 3, 1973 in a chapel on a hillside in beautiful Sausalito. We honeymooned in Hawaii, then went straight to Saigon to begin our life together.



Al Topping with Jan today (Al Topping Collection).

Living in Saigon

During my first few weeks living and working in South Vietnam, I was looking forward to the challenges of managing an operation in a war zone. There was no training; it was simply a matter of my predecessor passing me the baton. We were fortunate in that all of our Vietnamese employees were bilingual, knowledgeable and dedicated. They loved their job. For our Vietnamese employees, working for Pan Am represented what was a prestigious position in the eyes of the local community. For them, it was the equivalent of working for the U.S. Government. Normally, working for the U.S. Government overseas represented a positive image and a certain level of prestige for local employees. Just a short two and a half years later, however, U.S. companies and their employees were looked upon in a totally different light.

Unfortunately, one of my first administrative actions was to reduce our operating expenses for the Saigon operation. This was extremely difficult for me because local salaries were incomparable to wages in the United States. Furthermore, the highly productive performance the employees provided on a day-to-day basis far outweighed the cost. Nevertheless, whenever cost cutting is on the agenda, reduction in headcount is usually the first item to be addressed. Those actions were necessary because of the reduction in flight operations. We were now operating only twice weekly 747 services and limited 707 cargo services into Da Nang and Saigon. The cargo flights were operated in accordance with our Military Airlift Command (MAC) contracts for carrying mail and cargo to our troops and US government civilian employees serving in South Vietnam.

Living in South Vietnam had no resemblance to what I expected. Being the news junkie that I am, rarely did I miss the CBS Evening News with Walter Cronkite and/or Huntley-Brinkley

Report on NBC. Those nightly telecasts painted an entirely different picture than what I experienced there on the ground. The nightly news reports usually focused on the daily casualty counts for both sides. Most reports would conclude with what became a routine comment, "American casualties were light." We may never know the true casualty count, but for now we know that it was over 58,000. The combined casualties for both sides were approximately one million.



Right after Pan Am closed. December 11, 1991, Al Topping stands with Captain Mark Pyle in Miami a few days after Pyle piloted Pan Am's very last flight on Clipper Goodwill. (Al Topping Collection)