

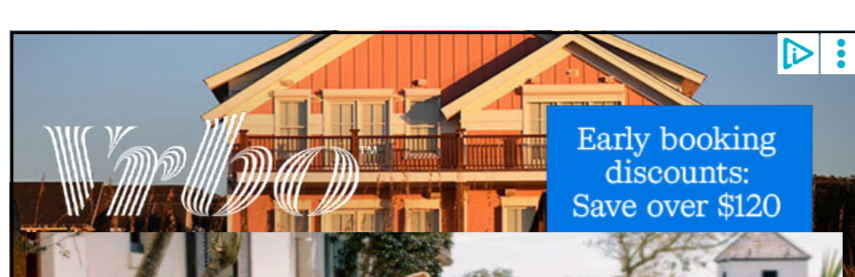
Valor: A Galaxy of Heroes

By John L. Frisbee | Aug. 1, 1991

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Instagram



At 4:03 p.m., April 3, 1975, Air Force C-5A Galaxy, serial number 68-218, lifted off the runway at Tan Son Nhut AB near Saigon, bound for Clark AB in the Philippines. The huge strategic transport carried the most precious cargo aircraft commander Dennis “Bud” Traynor and his crew of 16 had ever flown. This was the initial mission of Operation Babylift, directed by President Gerald Ford to bring Vietnamese orphans to the US in the few remaining days before the Republic of Vietnam fell.



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In the C-5’s troop compartment were 145 orphans and seven attendants, most of them civilian volunteers being evacuated from Vietnam. The cargo compartment held 102 orphans and 47 others. A 10-person medical team had volunteered to take care of the sick. The adults would have their hands full caring for the children, some only a few days old, but the weather was good and the 60th Military Airlift Wing crew and its aircraft were tops in the airlift business. Spirits were high as Captain Traynor and copilot Capt. Tilford Harp guided the Galaxy through 23,000 feet on a heading of 136 degrees. All was well.



Then at 4:15, 12 minutes after takeoff, there was what seemed to be an explosion as the lower rear fuselage was torn apart. Rapid decompression filled the plane with fog and a tornado of debris. The pressure door, most of the rear loading ramp (whose locks had failed), and the center cargo door had disappeared, leaving a gaping hole in the rear of the fuselage. Control and trim cables to the rudder and elevators were severed, leaving only one aileron and wing spoilers operating. Two of the four hydraulic systems were out. This was an emergency not foreseen by the C-5s builders or operators—a critical flight situation not covered in any flight manual. The lives of 328 people rested in the hands of Captain Traynor and his crew who, if any were to survive, had to invent a technique for managing a seemingly unmanageable aircraft. They had perhaps three minutes to solve that problem.

Before damage assessment was completed, Captain Traynor found with the elevators inoperative, he had no pitch control. As the nose dropped, airspeed increased to 300 knots. The C-5 began to climb, approaching stalling speed. A bank to the right and simultaneous power reduction brought the nose down in a steep dive. Normal pilot reaction would have been to chop the power, but Traynor’s knowledge of aerodynamics told him better. Instead he added power and as airspeed increased the nose slowly came up. Climb toward a stall again was checked by a steep bank and power reduction. Coordinating their efforts, Traynor managed the aircraft’s pitch with changes in power settings while copilot Harp controlled roll with the one working aileron and wing spoilers. In this way, the pilots established a marginally controlled rate of descent at 250–260 knots. The lag between power adjustments and aircraft response was considerable. Great finesse would be needed to make a successful landing and that, if possible, at somewhere in the range of a screaming 250 knots.

The aircraft was maneuvered gingerly to an altitude of 4,000 feet on a heading of 310 degrees in preparation for landing on Tan Son Nhut’s Runway 25L. About halfway through a turn to final approach, the rate of descent increased rapidly to 4,000 feet per minute. Seeing they couldn’t make the runway, Captain Traynor told copilot Harp to roll the wings level while he applied full power to bring the nose up. At 50 feet, Traynor retarded the throttles to idle and the C-5 touched down in a rice paddy. Skidding about 1,000 feet, the aircraft again became airborne for a half mile before hitting a dike and breaking into four parts. The cargo compartment was completely destroyed, killing 141 of the 149 orphans and attendants. Only three of 152 in the troop compartment perished. Five of the flight crew, three of the medical team, and three others lost their lives, but 175 of the 328 aboard survived.

The Accident Investigation Board attributed the survival of any on board to Captain Traynor’s unorthodox use of power and his decision to crash-land while the aircraft was under some control. Captains Traynor and Harp were awarded the Air Force Cross for extraordinary valor during those terrifying 15 minutes.

Once the wreckage came to rest, the flight and medical crews—many of them injured—performed countless acts of heroism in carrying the surviving orphans to safety. Thirty-seven medals were awarded to crew members or their next of kin. Flight nurse [Regina Aune](#) received the Cheney Award for 1975. (See June 1986 issue, “Valor;”) The crash of the Babylift C-5 was a tragedy that was saved from apocalyptic catastrophe only by a galaxy of heroes led by Capt. Dennis Traynor and Tilford Harp.

Published August 1991. For presentation on this web site, some Valor articles have been amended for accuracy.



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