

The Berlin Airlift and the Indochinese Refugee Movement

'Going under' - that was what the Indochinese refugee task force found themselves facing in Ottawa in the summer of 1979. The resource demands of overseas processing, maintaining the air bridge to Canada and the operational needs of matching private sponsors with incoming refugees in Canada were colliding. Private sponsors in Canada were vocal about their frustration with a system in which their offer to settle and support was followed by a long silence with no substantive communication and then culminated with a phone call to the effect that "your refugees will be at your door tomorrow." Overseas operations were equally vocal about the impossibility of both processing the refugees and timely feeding of the reporting/matching system.

The answer to the question "do we move paper or refugees" was a no brainer. Part of the solution came from an historical precedent - The Berlin Airlift. Back in the late 1940s the West faced the problem of trying to overcome a Soviet surface blockade of Berlin with an unending stream of flights filled with food, fuel and other necessities into a set of Berlin airports with some of the worst weather in Europe.

A supply flight would not be able to land on arrival and would be 'stacked' in a holding pattern over Berlin in the same way that unmatched refugees would be 'stacked' at the refugee reception centers in Canada - with the same results. Very quickly controlling the rapidly expanding Berlin 'stack' would consume so many resources and grow so unmanageable as to prevent any planes from landing. The solution - deceptively simple: pilots either landed in Berlin on their first pass or they were turned around and flew back to West Germany.

The Indochinese refugee variant was that refugees, whose names were sent ahead to Canada days before their flight took off, were either matched with a private sponsor by the time their flight went 'wheels up' out of Southeast Asia or they became a government sponsored refugee on arrival in Canada. The processing time required for all refugees at the reception centers in Canada provided the much appreciated warning buffer to the sponsors.

The matching system was brutal, fast and efficient. Supported by a stove sized computer, acquired in defiance of all normal procurement rules, it delivered 35,221 refugees to over 7000 sponsors between September 1979 and December 1980.

Ian Thomson