

Epilogue



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We were crouched in the second-floor corridor of the Continental Palace Hotel, wondering if the North Vietnamese Army had finally invaded Saigon, hoping it had not. The century-old walls trembled slightly from the concussion of the seven-hundred-pound bombs enemy planes were dropping on Tan Son Nhut airbase, five miles away. Every policeman and soldier in the city seemed to be firing a rifle or machine gun. The noise was deafening. Cringing in the hallway, we had no way of knowing whether the shooting was still directed at the planes or if a full-scale, street-to-street battle for the capital had begun. Having spent the past month observing the South Vietnamese Army losing one battle after another, there was no doubt in our minds that they would lose this one too. There was considerable doubt about our own future. As we listened to the thud of bombs and the rattle of small-arms fire, we asked each other unanswerable questions. Would there be enough time for an evacuation? If not, how would we, American correspondents, be treated by the Communist victors? In the final moments of chaos, would the South Vietnamese, feeling betrayed by Washington, turn their weapons on every American they saw?

It was useless to speculate under the circumstances. One of our more practical members suggested that we forgo debating what might happen and find out what was happening. After some hesitation, we left the shelter of the corridor and walked downstairs to the lobby. It was filled with frightened civilians and weeping children who had been driven in off the streets by gunfire. The hotel's high, wooden door was now barred, like the gate to a medieval castle. Four of us opened it cautiously and went outside.

The small-arms fire was still heavy, but it seemed aimed at the enemy jets that whined over the city, heading with their bombs for the airbase. We saw no green-clad soldiers in pith helmets—the enemy’s distinctive headgear. There were quite a few policemen, ARVN¹ soldiers, and other newsmen running down the streets. They were as confused as we. Together with my colleague from the *Chicago Tribune*, Ron Yates, I jogged over to the UPI offices, a block from the hotel.

We found confusion there as well. One reporter was melodramatically typing out a story while dressed in a helmet and flak jacket. Teletype machines clacked urgently. After reading the wire services’ dispatches, Yates and I decided that the final crisis, though near, had not yet arrived. Enemy units were still a day’s fighting from the city. Assuming that the American embassy would order an evacuation the following day, Yates and I went back to the hotel to pack our gear. It was dark by the time we finished. The air raid was over. Through the window of my top-floor room, I could see the flames of a burning fuel dump. Gekko lizards clung to the room’s white walls, the walls quaking from the secondary explosions set off by the bombs, the lizards immobile in their reptilian indifference.

I dragged my gear down to Nick Proffitt’s room, which was two floors below. Proffitt, the correspondent for *Newsweek*, had taken me in the week before when an enemy rocket had devastated the top floors of the nearby Metropole Hotel. Having survived one month of the 1975 offensive in Vietnam, I had no intention of being blown to bits in bed. Proffitt had kidded me about my fears. I didn’t mind. He could kid me all he wanted. At thirty-three, with a wife and two children to support, I no longer felt the need to prove anything to anyone.

Proffitt and I fell asleep in the early-morning hours. Lying on the floor behind the furniture with which I had barricaded the window, I was jarred awake when the North Vietnamese began shelling Tan Son Nhut and part of the city with rockets and 130-mm field guns. It was April 29. The bombardment went on for six hours. Around ten-thirty, a reporter who had a citizens’ band radio tuned to the American embassy’s frequency announced, “They’ve just passed the word. That’s it. It’s one-hundred-percent evacuation. It’s bye-bye everybody.”

A hasty, undignified exit followed. Crowds of newsmen, embassy officials, Vietnamese civilians, and various other “evacuees” stumbled down

¹ ARVN: Army of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam)

the half-deserted streets toward the evacuation points. I passed a group of ARVN militiamen and smiled at them wanly. “You go home now?” one of them asked. “Americans di-di?”²

“Yes,” I said, feeling like a deserter, “Americans di-di.”

Our motley column was eventually directed to a staging area across the street from a hospital. Columns of smoke were rising from the city’s outskirts, and someone said that North Vietnamese troops had been spotted only two miles from where we were standing. We stood about, dripping sweat and listening to the steady thud of the incoming one-thirties.³ Finally, two olive-drab buses, led by a car with a flashing mars light, pulled up. We piled on board, some sixty or seventy crammed on each bus, the small convoy heading for Tan Son Nhut.

We were just passing through the airport’s main gate as a South Vietnamese plane took off from the smoking, cratered runway. An old C-119 cargo plane, it had not climbed more than a few hundred feet when a spiraling fireball rose up behind it. There was a great boom as the anti-aircraft missile slammed into the C-119 and sent it crashing into the city. Our nervousness turned to fear, for we were to be evacuated by helicopter. Easy targets.

The buses stopped in front of a complex of buildings known as the Defense Attaché’s Office. During the height of American involvement in the war, the complex had been called Pentagon East. It had served as Westmoreland’s headquarters. The tennis courts nearby were to be the landing zone for the helicopters. We clambered off the buses, spurred on by a heavy shell that banged into the tarmac seventy-five yards away. “Don’t panic,” someone said in a voice several octaves higher than normal.

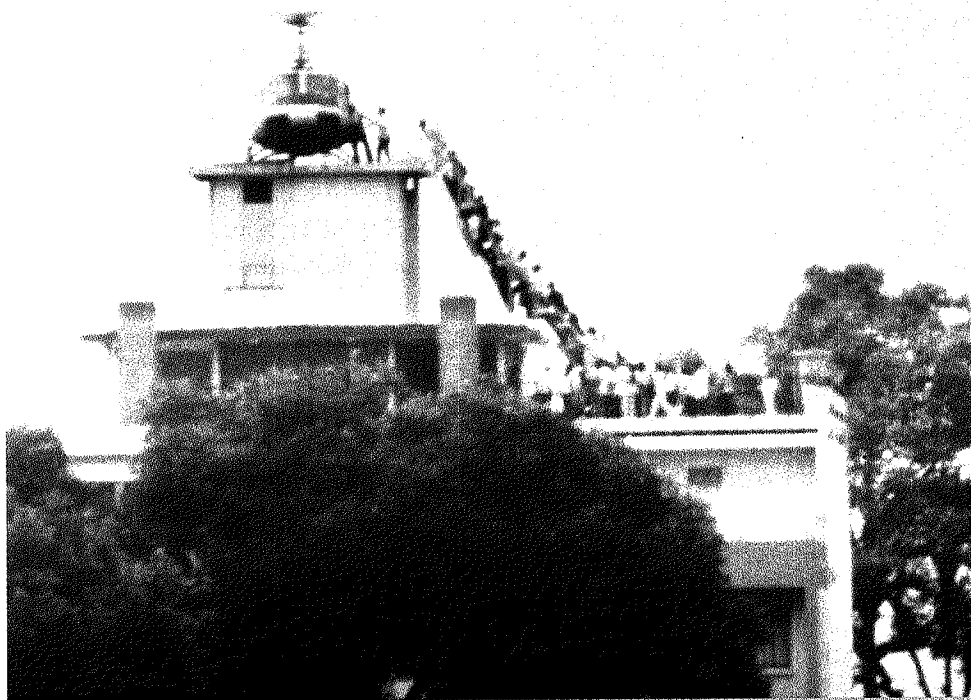
Inside the building, we were lined up, divided into helicopter teams, and tagged. Every foot of every long corridor in the building was filled with Americans, Vietnamese refugees, newsmen from a dozen different countries, even a few old French plantation owners. The walls shook from the blasts of the shells hitting the runway. Small-arms fire crackled at the perimeter of the airbase. It was going to be a hot LZ.⁴ I hoped it would be my last one, and I tried not to think about those anti-aircraft missiles.

We sweated it out in there until the late afternoon, when the first of the Marine helicopters arrived. They were big CH-53s, each capable of

2 **di-di**: Vietnamese slang for “go”

3 **one-thirties**: shells from 130-mm canons

4 **LZ**: landing zone



Evacuation from the roof of the U.S. Embassy in Saigon.

holding as many people as a small airliner. “Okay, let’s go!” yelled a Marine sergeant from the embassy guard. “Let’s go. Drop all your luggage. No room for that. Move! Move! Move!” I dropped the valise I had lugged around all day and dashed out the door, running across the tennis courts toward the aircraft. Marine riflemen were crouched around the LZ, their weapons pointed toward the trees and rice paddies at the fringes of the airfield. Together with some sixty other people, half of them Vietnamese civilians and ARVN officers, I scrambled on board one of the CH-53s.

The helicopter lifted off, climbing rapidly. Within minutes, we were at six thousand feet, the wreckage of the South Vietnamese cargo plane burning far below. It was all so familiar: the deafening racket inside the helicopter; the door gunners crouched behind their machine guns, muzzles pointed down at the green and brown gridwork of the Mekong Delta through which flooded rivers spread like a network of blood vessels; and

the expectant waiting—terrifying and yet exhilarating—as we looked for tracers or for the bright corkscrewing ball of a heat-seeking missile. One started to come up, but the lead helicopter in our flight diverted it with a decoy flare that simulated an aircraft engine’s heat. We took some ground fire—fire from South Vietnamese soldiers who probably felt that the Americans had betrayed them.

My mind shot back a decade, to that day we had marched into Vietnam, swaggering, confident, and full of idealism. We had believed we were there for a high moral purpose. But somehow our idealism was lost, our morals corrupted, and the purpose forgotten.

We reached the coast about twenty minutes later. We were out of danger, out of range of the missiles, removed from all possibility of being among the last Americans to die in Vietnam. Relaxing their grip on the .50-caliber machine guns, the door gunners grinned and flashed the thumbs-up sign. Swooping out over the South China Sea, over the thousands of fishing junks jammed with refugees, the CH-53 touched down on the U.S.S. *Denver*, a helicopter assault ship that was part of the armada the Seventh Fleet had assembled for the evacuation. There was some applause as the aircraft settled down on the flight deck and as we filed out, a marine slapped me on the back and said, “Welcome home. Bet you’re glad to be out of there.” I was, of course. I asked him which outfit he was from. “Ninth MEB,” he answered. The 9th Expeditionary Brigade, the same unit with which I had landed at Danang. But the men who belonged to it now seemed a good deal more cynical than we who had belonged to it ten years before. The marine looked at the faint blue line marking the Vietnamese coast and said, “Well, that’s one country we don’t have to give billions of dollars to anymore.”

The evacuees were processed and sent down to the scorching mess deck for a meal. Most of us were giddy with relief, but one disconsolate diplomat from the American embassy just sat and muttered to himself, “It’s over. It’s the end. It’s the end of an era. It was a lousy way to have it end, but I guess it had to end some way.” Exhausted and sweating, he just shook his head. “The end of an era.” I supposed it was, but I was much too tired to reflect on the historical significance of the event in which I had just taken part: America had lost its first war.

The next day, April 30, the ship’s captain announced that the Saigon government had surrendered to the North Vietnamese. We took the news quietly. It was over. ∞