

Twenty-five years ago this month, the Vietnam War came to an end with bewildering speed.

The Fall of

On April 30, 1975, North Vietnamese troops accepted the surrender of Saigon and thus snuffed out the Republic of Vietnam, humiliating Washington in the process. Saigon, within 24 hours, had become Ho Chi Minh City. The surrender of the capital and its prompt renaming—25 years ago this month—became the ultimate symbol of the failure of US policy in Southeast Asia.

For Americans, that day forever will be remembered for the spectacle of overcrowded US helicopters fleeing in a badly timed but well-executed evacuation, their flight to safety contrasting with the terror that gripped thousands of loyal South Vietnamese left to their fates. The media presented hundreds of wrenching scenes—tiny boats overcrowded with soldiers and family members, people trying to force their way onto the US Embassy grounds, Vietnamese babies being passed over barbed wire to waiting hands and an unknown future.

Saigon fell with bewildering speed. After 21 years of struggle against the Communist forces, the South Vietnamese army collapsed in just weeks into a disorganized mass, unable to slow, much less halt, forces from the North.

In nearly 30 years of war, Hanoi had defeated France and South Vietnam on the battlefield and the US at the negotiating table. The Communist regime was expert in manipulating US opinion. For example, Hanoi had converted its debilitating defeat in the 1968 Tet Offensive into a stunning propaganda victory, one that ultimately drove the United States out of the war.

Still, North Vietnam had suffered about 50,000 casualties in Tet and was similarly mauled in its spring

1972 offensive against the South. The People's Army of Vietnam needed time to recuperate.

Thieu's Gambit

South Vietnam's president, Nguyen Van Thieu, took advantage of Hanoi's decision to refit and re-equip, extending the South Vietnamese hold on territory wherever possible. The result was that the South Vietnamese army was spread out over a large area and by late 1974 was ripe for an attack. Its condition was worsened by the drying up of US assistance, a drastic increase in inflation, and, as always, flagrant corruption.

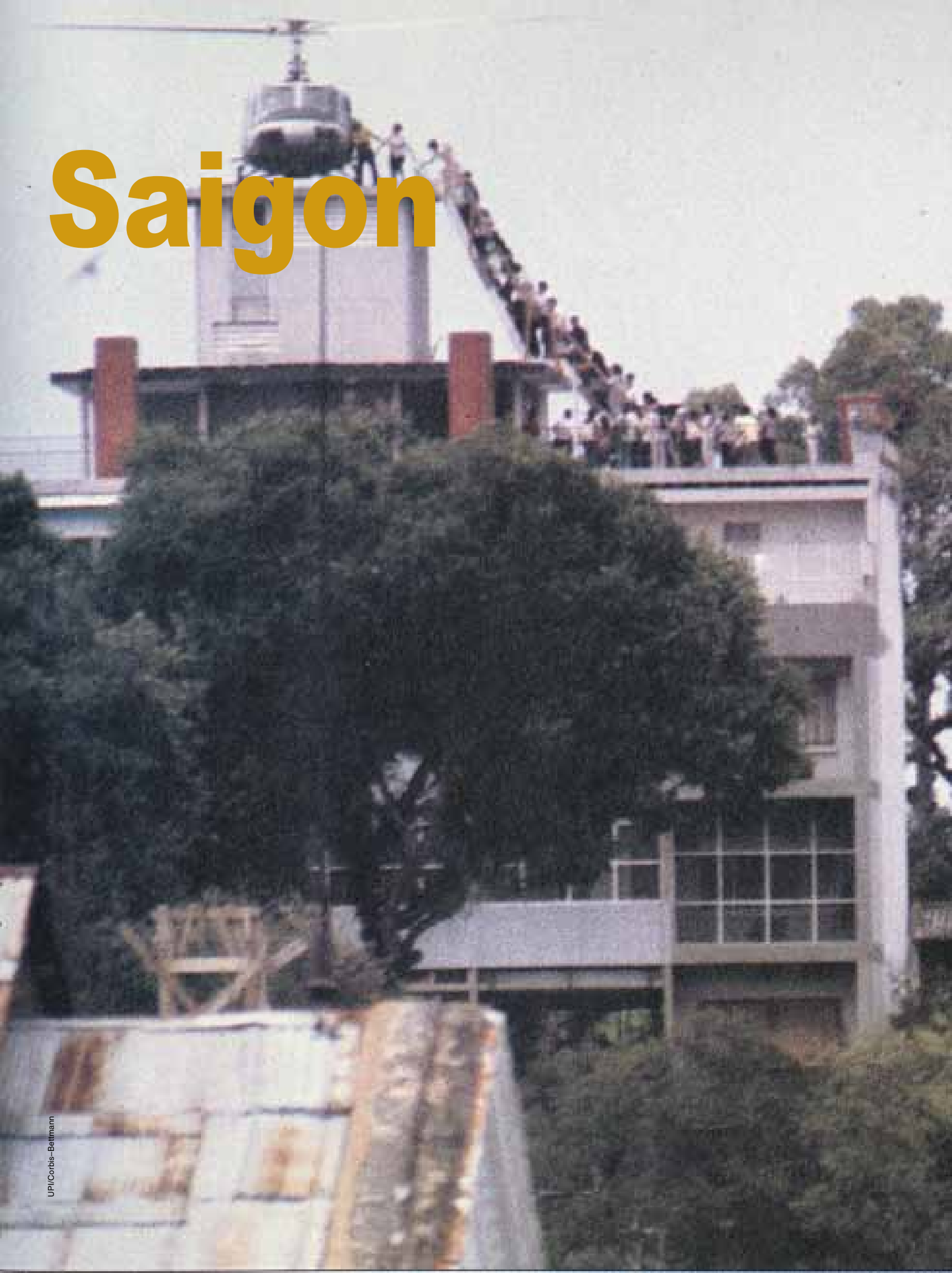
The January 1973 Paris peace accords led to a near-total withdrawal of US forces in early 1973. In fall 1974, leaders in Hanoi had decided upon a two-year program to conquer the South and unite the two countries under Communist rule. Called "General Offensive, General Uprising," the program was designed so that a series of major military offensives in 1975 would bring the South Vietnamese population to the point of revolution and permit a conclusive victory in 1976.

North Vietnam was well aware of the disarray in American politics since President Richard M. Nixon's August 1974 resignation, and it decided to test the waters. In January 1975, it conquered Phuoc Long province on the border with Cambodia. North Vietnamese regular units, supplemented by local guerrillas, routed the South Vietnamese army in a mere three weeks. More than 3,000 South Vietnamese troops were killed or captured, and supplies worth millions were lost to the invaders. Although Phuoc Long was not particularly important in either military or economic terms, it was the first

By Walter J. Boyne

After more than two decades of fighting the Communists, the South Vietnamese army collapsed quickly in early 1975, setting in motion chaotic evacuations like this one from a rooftop in Saigon.

Saigon





South Vietnamese President Thieu withdrew his forces from the Central Highlands after Ban Me Thuot fell March 12. The North Vietnamese then moved to take over Pleiku, triggering this exodus of soldiers and civilians.

province the North Vietnamese had taken since 1972—and it was only 80 miles from Saigon.

This absolutely crucial event was scarcely noted in the American news media. Washington had pledged to “respond with decisive military force” to any North Vietnamese violation of the 1973 accords. In the end, however, the US did nothing at all. Hanoi doubtless was encouraged to continue.

Oddly enough, Thieu was not discouraged. That is because he continued to believe in Nixon’s promises, even after Nixon had been forced to resign, and he would continue to believe in those promises almost to the end, frequently musing about “when the B-52s would return.”

March 1975 saw Hanoi make its next seriously aggressive move. In the preceding two years, North Vietnam’s army patiently moved into the South enormous quantities of Soviet artillery, surface-to-air missiles, and armored vehicles, along with 100,000 fresh troops. The Paris accords allowed more than 80,000 North Vietnamese regular troops to remain in the South, and their numbers had already increased to more than 200,000.

North Vietnamese regular and guerrilla forces now numbered some 1 million, despite the heavy losses of the previous decade. North Vietnam’s army units, created by Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap, were weapons-intensive, with few logistics or support personnel. In contrast, South Vietnam’s army

was modeled on the US Army. It had about 750,000 troops, of which only about 150,000 were combat troops. They were well-equipped but poorly supported, despite the Army’s huge logistics tail.

Giap in 1973 had become ill with Hodgkin’s disease, and power passed to his protégé, Van Tien Dung, North Vietnam’s only other four-star general. Dung, a short, square-faced peasant who had worked his way up through the ranks, carefully infiltrated his forces so that he was able to set up his headquarters at Loc Ninh, only 75 miles north of Saigon. The elaborate preparations included construction of an oil pipeline and telephone grid that was impervious to electronic countermeasures.

Dung dictated tactics designed to minimize casualties from the massed firepower upon which South Vietnam’s army had been trained to rely. Unfortunately for the South Vietnamese, their supplies of ammunition were badly depleted by rampant inflation and severe reductions in American aid.

Final Battle Begins

Dung arrived at Loc Ninh via the Ho Chi Minh Trail, now expanded from foot paths to include paved, two-lane highways with extensions that reached within 30 miles of Saigon. His first target was Ban Me Thuot, a city in the Central Highlands and the capital of Darlac province. It was the absolutely vital link in the South

Vietnamese army’s defenses. If it were lost, Communist forces could easily cut South Vietnam in half.

North Vietnam disguised its real assault by mounting pinprick attacks in the two northernmost provinces of South Vietnam. Minor though they were, they triggered a panic flight of more than 50,000 refugees that would have immense effect on battles soon to come.

Northern forces isolated Ban Me Thuot by cutting off or blocking the main highways to it. On March 10, 1975, three North Vietnamese army divisions, well-equipped with tanks, assaulted the city, which was defended by two reinforced regiments of the 23rd Division. Despite a barrage of 122 mm artillery fire, the South Vietnamese army, commanded by Maj. Gen. Pham Van Phu, fought well. However, they were worn down and, by March 12, Dung had essentially captured the city.

It was at Ban Me Thuot that there first occurred a phenomenon that would increasingly undermine the South’s morale. Many of its army officers used helicopters to pick up their families and flee to the south with them. Phu himself fled when the time came.

South Vietnamese hordes then began to flee the countryside, crowding the main roads and the pathways in a mass exodus for the coast, where they ultimately jammed seaports seeking transport to the south. The refugees included not only those civilians who had helped the South’s army or the Americans, but also a great mass who had no reason to expect bad treatment from North Vietnam’s army. They were simply fleeing in the general panic.

The refugee crowd had another characteristic, one that would prove to have a disastrous effect upon South Vietnamese resistance. South Vietnamese soldiers were leaving the line of battle to find their families and escort them to safety. It was a natural response to the war, but it accelerated the dissolution of the South’s capability to resist.

Fatal Error

Thieu had believed the target of Dung’s attack would be Pleiku. He panicked on learning of the fall of Ban Me Thuot and on March 14 secretly ordered the withdrawal of the South’s forces from the Central

Highlands. It was a monumental error, for no plans for the withdrawal had been drawn up, and the orders to leave simply plunged the remaining troops into a mass of refugees whose agonizing journey came to be called "the convoy of tears."

This flight of refugees was unlike those seen in World War II. Those fleeing the Communists in Vietnam resorted to each and every kind of conveyance: buses, tanks, trucks, armored personnel carriers, private cars. Anything with wheels was pressed nose to tail along Route 7B. The vehicles were jammed with soldiers and overloaded with family members—from babes in arms to aged grandparents—packed on top or clinging to the side, like jitney riders. Many of those who fell off were crushed by the vehicle behind.

Thousands more fled on foot, carrying their pathetic belongings with them. For 15 hot days and cold nights there was no food or water available, and the route was littered with abandoned people—children, the elderly, the infirm.

North Vietnamese army troops of the 320th Division pounced on the disorganized mob trying to get to the coast and kept them under constant attack, killing thousands of civilians. North Vietnamese artillery would destroy one vehicle after another at near point-blank range, throwing body parts into trees and drenching the ground with blood.

It was a different kind of slaughter.

Unlike Kosovo where long-standing ethnic hatred led to the killing of a few thousands, the slaughter here was between people of the same blood. As many as 40,000 died on the road. The situation worsened when renegade South Vietnamese army troops also began firing on the refugee columns.

Compounding this sad spectacle was the fact that, when the exhausted survivors finally made it to a seaport, they were exploited by fellow countrymen who charged exorbitant prices for food and sold water for \$2 a glass. Here the South Vietnamese army turned into an armed mob, preying on civilians and looting whatever could be found.

Dung swiftly swung north and on March 18 occupied Kontum and Pleiku, putting the invasion weeks ahead of schedule. It was a South Vietnamese debacle, with the southern army managing to lose the war faster than North Vietnam's army could win it.

Thieu's hasty and ill-advised surrender of the Central Highlands had cost South Vietnam six provinces and two regular army divisions. More than a billion dollars in materiel was abandoned.

Improvisation and Delusion

The South Vietnamese leader now began to improvise an enclave policy. His forces would concentrate on holding certain coastal cities, including Da Nang, along with Saigon and the Delta region.

Thieu, a tough politician, had an almost childlike belief that holding these areas would give the United States time to exert its military power and once again force the North Vietnamese to negotiate.

North Vietnamese forces unleashed attacks in Quang Tri province in late March, accelerating the flow of refugees. In Hue city, the citizens were alarmed. The city had suffered greatly in 1968 during the Communists' 25-day Tet occupation. It lost another 20,000 civilians during the North's 1972 offensive. Once again, soldiers and citizens merged to join the throng headed for Da Nang. By March 23, a combination of rumors, desertions, and North Vietnamese propaganda had made Hue indefensible. It fell on March 24.

As Communist artillery shelled Hue and all of the roads leading to and from it, other forces surrounded Da Nang, to which more than 1 million refugees had fled, leaving behind those killed by artillery, collisions, and mob stampedes. Thousands attempted to escape by sea, fleeing in anything that would float. Many drowned.

At Da Nang, a civilian airlift began, presaging the later confusion and terror at Saigon. Edward J. Daly, president of World Airways, defied US Ambassador Graham A. Martin and dispatched two Boeing 727s to Da Nang, flying on the first one himself. After landing, his airplane was mobbed by thousands of people, some 270 of whom were finally jammed on board. (All but a handful of these were armed soldiers—not the civilians that Daly had intended to evacuate.) The 727 took off amid gunfire and a grenade explosion that damaged the flaps. It hit a fence and a vehicle before staggering into the air. People had crowded into the wheel well, and one man was crushed as the gear came up and jammed.

Somehow the 727 made it back to Saigon, gear down and with split flaps, managing to land safely. The dreadful photos of the dead man's feet hanging from the gear doors told the miserable story. Ironically the one man's death saved four others who had also climbed into the wheel well, for his crushed body had prevented the gear from retracting all the way. Later, when the details of the overweight and damage-laden takeoff were sent to Boeing for analysis, the



On a bridge in Saigon two days before the city fell to the Communists, a South Vietnamese soldier hangs on to a wounded comrade during an enemy attack April 28.

UPI/Corbis-Bettmann



On foot and on anything with wheels, refugees evacuate ahead of Communist forces. Their numbers included civilians who had aided the South Vietnamese army or the Americans, as well as those simply fleeing in general panic.

response was that the 727 should not have been able to fly.

The seaborne disasters that occurred at Hue were repeated at Da Nang on a larger scale, as people were trampled to death by crowds fighting to board the larger ships. More than 2 million people were crowded into Da Nang, but only 50,000 would escape by sea. In what was now a familiar pattern, discipline broke down as Communist artillery fire raked the city and widespread looting began. Organized resistance crumbled, and fleeing civilians were caught in a murderous cross fire between North Vietnamese and South Vietnamese troops.

The Communist forces entered Da Nang on March 29. Qui Nhon fell on March 31 and Nha Trang on April 3. The battle for Nha Trang lasted only three hours. The rich resources of Cam Ranh Bay fell on the same day after only 30 minutes of fighting. These reverses soon were followed by the fall of other coastal towns. Phu Cat airport was captured with more than 60 flyable aircraft in place.

Lost in the melee was materiel valued at billions of dollars. Anyone who flew in or out of Da Nang or Cam Ranh during the Vietnam War will recall the thousands of acres of supplies stacked around the airfields. That gigantic supply stockpile fell into Communist hands.

Going for Broke

Now it was Hanoi's turn to impro-

vide. Shocked by the speed of its success, North Vietnam hastily proclaimed a new goal: the conquest of South Vietnam in time to celebrate the May 19 birth date of the late Ho Chi Minh. Dung termed his military action "the Ho Chi Minh Campaign" and gave his troops a new slogan: "Lightning speed, daring, and more daring."

They complied, and by early April, North Vietnam's forces had severed the roads around Saigon and had begun shelling Bien Hoa airfield. A battle began on April 9 at Xuan Loc, located on National Route 1 only 37 miles northeast of Saigon.

Southern forces fought well during the course of the bitter 15-day fight. This was particularly true of the 18th Division, an outfit that previously had a bad reputation. Here, it fought on after suffering 30 percent casualties. However, it received no reinforcements, and it faced North Vietnam's 4th Corps. During this battle, the remnant of South Vietnam's air force carried out its last effective operation, using cluster bombs, 15,000-pound daisy cutters, and even a CBU-55B asphyxiation bomb.

Elsewhere in the region, the United States on April 12 evacuated 276 Americans from Phnom Penh, Cambodia, in Operation Eagle Pull. The withdrawal sent Hanoi yet another signal that US intervention was not to be feared in South Vietnam. Unaccountably, Thieu for another nine days clung to the hope of US intervention. Then, on April 21, he resigned, turning the government over to aging and feeble Tran Van Huong.

South Vietnamese morale was not helped by rumors, which turned out to be true, that Thieu was sending personal goods and money out of the country. In short order, the man followed his valuables into exile in Taiwan and then Britain.

Xuan Loc fell on April 23, and there was now little to prevent or slow the Communist advance on Saigon. That same day, in an address at Tulane University, President Gerald Ford stated that the war in Vietnam "is finished as



South Vietnamese civilians scale the wall of the US Embassy in Saigon on April 29 to reach evacuation helicopters that were using the embassy's courtyard and rooftop as landing pads.

far as America is concerned.” He got a standing ovation.

Huong, South Vietnam’s new president, transferred power to Gen. Duong Van Minh. “Big Minh,” as he was called, had planned the assassinations in 1963 of South Vietnam’s president, Ngo Dinh Diem, and Diem’s brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu. The South Vietnamese leadership was out of options and had come to the fantastic conclusion that the Communists might negotiate with Minh. This was far from reality; North Vietnamese regular army troops and tanks had by then surrounded Saigon, which became yet another city in panic.

On Life Support

South Vietnam’s capital city was located some 45 miles from the coast of the South China Sea on the Saigon River. Long called the “Paris of the Orient,” it had lost only part of its French-colonial beauty in the long war. It had, however, lost confidence in its government. Despite many officials who did their jobs well, there were far too many high-ranking people who were not only corrupt but incompetent. It was not a government to inspire its people to fight to the last, but it was the government to which the United States had obligations. It was also a government that the American Embassy had to keep functioning as long as possible in order to evacuate the maximum number of Americans and loyal South Vietnamese.

Martin, the US envoy, had tried to shore up Thieu, lobbying for additional US military and financial aid. His efforts were sincere but they delayed the implementation of plans to evacuate American and South Vietnamese supporters of the administration from Saigon until it was far too late.

Fortunately, two evacuation operations were already in action, and the execution of the third was in the hands of professionals. The first of these, Operation Babylift, had been conducted between April 4 and 14, and some 2,600 Vietnamese children were taken to the United States to be adopted. Babylift was marred by a tragic accident on the first flight of the operation, April 4, 1975.

A C-5A transport had taken off and



UPI/Corbis-Bettmann

During the last two days, more than 600 US military flights airlifted evacuees from Saigon to ships offshore. Air America also joined the effort. Above, civilians head for a helicopter at Tan Son Nhut.

climbed to 23,000 feet when an explosive decompression blew out a huge section of the aft cargo door, cutting the control cables to the elevator and rudder. Capt. Dennis Traynor did a masterful job of flying the airplane, using power for pitch and ailerons for directional control. He managed to bring the aircraft back to within five miles of Tan Son Nhut, where he made a semicontrolled crash. Of the 382 people aboard, 206 were killed, most of them children.

All subsequent flights were made safely. The Babylift operation later came under criticism for its overt attempt to create good public relations and for some of the criteria used in selecting the children. In the end, Babylift could be evaluated as yet another good-hearted attempt by the United States to do the right thing under difficult circumstances.

The second evacuation had been going on quietly for many days, relying on standard civilian and military airlift and virtually anything that would float. Some 57,700 were flown out by fixed wing aircraft, and 73,000 left by sea. About 5,000 Americans were evacuated—everyone who wished to come—plus many foreigners. South Vietnamese who were airlifted out were for the most part people whose service to their government or to the United States made them candidates for execution by the Communists.

There were many instances of individual courage, as exempli-

fied by Francis Terry McNamara, the US consul general in Can Tho. McNamara, at great personal risk, commandeered landing craft to ferry hundreds of Vietnamese down the Bassac River to safety. Neither blinding rainstorms, South Vietnamese navy, nor North Vietnamese regulars stopped him.

Frequent Wind

Martin, who was perhaps too courageous for his own and for his people’s good, was not persuaded to begin a formal evacuation until April 29. Tan Son Nhut had been hit by a small formation of Cessna A-37 aircraft, led by the renegade South Vietnamese pilot, Nguyen Thanh Trung, who previously bombed the presidential palace from his F-5. Then North Vietnamese rockets and 130 mm artillery shells began dropping on the airfield, while SA-7 missiles were being used successfully outside the perimeter.

Finally, after a personal visit, Martin became convinced that Tan Son Nhut was no longer suitable for use by fixed wing aircraft. He reluctantly initiated Operation Frequent Wind.

Frequent Wind turned out to be the helicopter evacuation of Saigon from the Defense Attaché’s Office at Tan Son Nhut and from the embassy compound itself. Some 6,236 passengers were removed to safety, despite severe harassing fire. To some, however, it seemed that the



US Navy personnel push a helicopter off USS Blue Ridge to make room for more evacuation flights out of Saigon. Below, Communist soldiers in a Russian-made tank wave the flag after taking over the presidential palace in Saigon on April 30.

DAO area and the evacuation process itself were deliberately spared by the North Vietnamese.

At the embassy, large helicopters used the walled-in courtyard as a landing pad while small helicopters lifted people from the roof. Despite the lack of time and inadequate landing facilities, crews performed with remarkable precision.

On April 29 and 30, 662 US military airlift flights took place between Saigon and ships 80 miles away. Ten Air Force HH/CH-53s flew 82 missions, while 61 Marine Corps CH-46s and CH-53s flew 556 sorties. There were 325 support aircraft sorties by Marine, Navy, and USAF aircraft. Air America, the CIA proprietary airline, joined in, having flown 1,000 sorties in the previous month. Air America crews distinguished themselves with a selfless bravery not usually attributed to “mercenaries.”

The end came on April 30. At 4:58 a.m., a CH-46 helicopter, call sign “Lady Ace 09,” flown by Capt. Jerry Berry, transported Martin from the embassy roof to the waiting US fleet. At 7:53 a.m., the last helicopter lifted off, carrying Marine personnel who had been defending the embassy. It left behind many South Vietnamese (250 to 400, depending upon which source is consulted) who had been promised escape. They were simply abandoned. It was the last of a long series of US betrayals in Vietnam.

There were more evacuations to come, unplanned and totally chaotic.



Every South Vietnamese helicopter was crammed with people and these were flown, like a swarm of bees, to the waiting ships of the 7th Fleet. The helicopters would land (sometimes on top of each other) and their occupants would be disarmed and led away. The helicopters would then be dumped over the side to make room for the next one incoming. At least 45 were disposed of like this; many more were stored for future use.

controlled anything that could be surrendered.

At 3:30 p.m., however, the North Vietnamese conquerors relented just a bit. Reconsidering, they allowed the last chief executive of South Vietnam to broadcast over the radio an abject, two-sentence speech of surrender. By then, a new darkness already had descended on the people of what once had been South Vietnam. ■

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