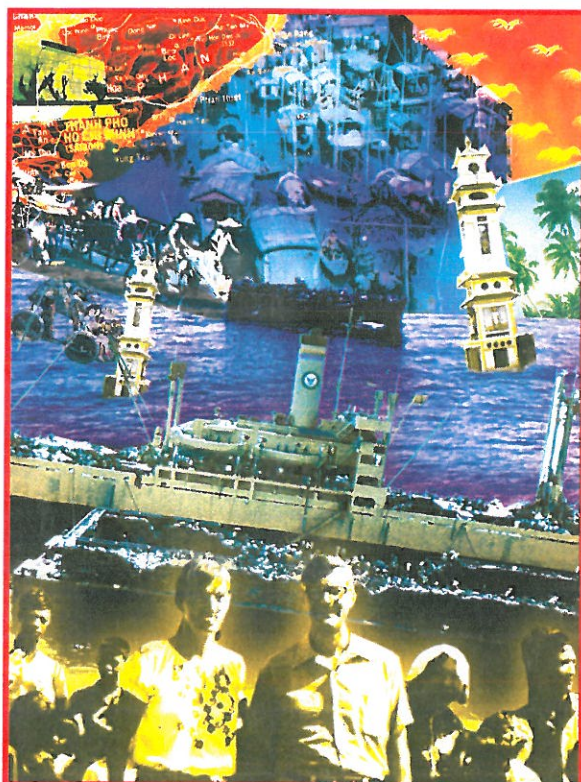


# LEAVING SAIGON: AN FSO'S LAST DAY IN VIETNAM



Ben Fishman

**T**HE HELICOPTERS FLEW THE LAST U.S. OFFICIALS OUT OF SAIGON 25 YEARS AGO. ONE FSO RECALLS THAT HARROWING DAY.

*BY RICHARD S. THOMPSON*

The impact of massive explosions only a few miles from my villa in Saigon awakened me abruptly. It was 4 a.m. on Tuesday, April 29, 1975. Even half-asleep, I instantly knew that North Vietnamese forces, which had been steadily approaching the capital over the past several weeks, had begun shelling Tan Son Nhut Airfield just north of town. I also realized that this bombardment probably signaled the beginning of the final American evacuation that the embassy had been planning for weeks. I had already sent my family to Bangkok several weeks earlier, and had packed my household effects for shipment.

For the past two weeks, each morning when I went down to breakfast, there had been several solemn-faced Vietnamese waiting in my living room. Some I knew; others had been referred by third parties. As I ate,

apologizing for the discourtesy, each would come to the table to tell me why he or she would be in danger in the event of a communist victory, and would hand me a list of family members who should be evacuated and a contact telephone number or address.

When I arrived at the embassy a little later each morning, I would type a brief cover memo for each list with my assessment of the merits of the request, and put them in the in-box of Shep Lowman, chief of the Internal Political Affairs Unit. He and his staff would sort through the requests and each night would pick up those selected for evacuation and take them to Tan Son Nhut Airport for departure on American aircraft.

On my last morning in Saigon, however, no one was waiting to greet me when I came down to breakfast. I was alone except for Nguyet, one of the maids on my household staff, who served me breakfast. I speculated that the Vietnamese were no longer seeking me out because they had also heard the bombardment of Tan Son Nhut, and decided the U.S. government could no longer help them.

Preparing for work, I put on my best dark blue, tropical weight, pinstriped suit. I might as well take my best suit out with me, I thought, since most of my wardrobe would be left behind. I also packed a small black bag I had purchased in the market a couple of weeks before, taking necessities such as cotton clothing, a toilet kit and a towel which would (and did) keep me comfortable aboard my evacuation ship. When I got into my car, I placed the small bag against the passenger side door, where my Vietnamese gate guard couldn't see it and become alarmed as I drove out the gate of my compound.

### **Signs And Portents**

As I drove the few blocks from my house to the embassy, a modern concrete structure with a helicopter pad on the roof, I reflected on my long associ-

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## ***Just a few days after I first arrived in Saigon in 1968, the embassy was attacked and almost blown up.***

ation with Vietnam, and how the end of my time in country was mirroring the turmoil and uncertainty I had experienced upon my arrival in Saigon in January 1968, following 42 weeks of Vietnamese language training.

Just a few days after I reported for duty to the political section, the embassy was attacked and almost

blown up by a Viet Cong sapper unit as part of the famous Tet offensive. I could hear the nighttime attack from my apartment a few blocks away, and arrived at the embassy the next morning to find the building damaged but not penetrated, and the bodies of guerrillas still lying near the entrance. This was my welcome to almost four years of service in the embassy political section, including considerable travel in the provinces with many exciting and sometimes anxious experiences.

In 1972 I was assigned to the Paris Peace Talks, where I had a front-row seat for the final negotiations that resulted in the Paris Agreement on Vietnam of January 1973. Under this agreement American troops were withdrawn and our POWs were released, although substantial American aid to the Republic of South Vietnam continued. In 1974, Ambassador Graham Martin asked me to return to Saigon, which I did, along with my wife and three children. As chief of the External Political Affairs Unit of the Political Section, my job was to work with the South Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs to defend the position of the Republic of Vietnam and the United States in international organizations and ensure that Saigon, not Hanoi, represented the country.

The first part of that last Saigon tour was quite pleasant, with few hostilities and growing prosperity among the Vietnamese. President Nixon had given South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu strong assurances of a forceful U.S. response if Hanoi violated the Paris Agreement. After Nixon resigned in August 1974, however, the North Vietnamese became less fearful that renewed activity on their part would arouse such a response, and stepped up their infiltration of the South.

On Jan. 7, 1975, Northern forces captured the capital of Phuoc Long Province only 75 miles north



of Saigon. When there was no American reaction, North Vietnam decided to move ahead as soon as possible, accelerating its original plans for victory in 1976.

The capture of the mountain provincial capital of Ban Me Thuot on March 10 by three North Vietnamese divisions not even known to be in the area sparked general agreement in the American mission, at least at the working level, that a North Vietnamese victory was near. (Nevertheless, I suspect embassy reporting to Washington remained more sanguine for a time.)

In the following weeks large areas of South Vietnam were abandoned to the communist forces, and the Saigon government's confused efforts to withdraw South Vietnamese units to more defensible positions merely resulted in the dissolution of these units as effective fighting forces. North Vietnam was able to concentrate its forces at any location it desired and thus achieve overwhelming superiority over the thinly spread South Vietnamese forces.

With North Vietnamese military forces rapidly closing in on Saigon, President Thieu resigned, hoping his departure would facilitate negotiations, and was succeeded by Vice President Tran Van Huong. The communists continued to demand an entirely new administration and an end to all U.S. involvement in Vietnam. After some hesitation, on April 27 the National Assembly recommended that full presidential powers be conferred on General Duong Van Minh (commonly referred to as "Big Minh"), who was considered more acceptable to the communists.

Normally the Internal Affairs Unit of the embassy would have reported on events in the assembly, but they were busy helping endangered Vietnamese — including many of my breakfast visitors — leave the country. Since I had reported on the assembly during earlier tours of duty in Saigon, I was pressed into action. I was concerned that legislators would be angry at the Americans for abandoning them, but they greeted me warmly as an old friend and explained to me what they were doing. As far as I

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know they all remained in Saigon and took part in the April 27 debate. They took very seriously their role under the constitution of the Republic of Vietnam, and did not want to leave while this constitution was still in force. I was deeply impressed by their loyalty. But once they had recommended the appointment of General Minh, an action totally outside the scope of the constitution, they felt the constitutional basis of the Republic of Vietnam had been destroyed. They therefore had no further responsibilities and were free to leave the country.

These final days in Saigon were both surreal and poignant. On one occasion I was enjoying an elegant lunch with my friend Bud Merick, a reporter for *U.S. News & World Report*, in the top floor restaurant of the Caravelle Hotel. As we were being served by an elderly, French-trained waiter, we could clearly see a bridge across the Saigon River about three miles away that had been the scene of skirmishes, and thick black smoke rising from the U.S. embassy warehouse on the other side. We joked that this smoke might be coming from my household effects, which had only recently been packed for shipping. It was only several months later that I learned my goods had in fact made it out of Saigon in the last commercial shipment.

In these last days there were two schools of thought about the likely final scenario. Ambassador Martin, based at least in part on the advice of the Polish and Hungarian delegates present in Saigon as part of a commission to oversee the Paris Agreements, still believed the North Vietnamese might voluntarily stop short of capturing Saigon. Instead, he anticipated that the communists would negotiate a coalition government which they would dominate, but which could be portrayed as falling within the terms of the 1973 agreement. Such an arrangement would pave the way for a continued American presence in Saigon, international recognition and foreign assistance.

## F O C U S

Saigon-based CIA Hanoi-watcher Frank Snepp was the chief proponent of the competing school of thought on the endgame. His contacts with Vietnamese communist intelligence sources convinced him that Hanoi's aim was indeed the military seizure of Saigon and the South. (Snepp's *Decent Interval* is a fascinating account of the last days of the American mission in Saigon.) This more hard-boiled prediction proved to be correct.

During these final weeks the embassy had been doing its best to reduce the number of Americans (U.S. government employees, their family members and private citizens) in Vietnam, so that as few people as possible would have to depart by helicopter in a final evacuation. To the great distress of Ambassador Martin and

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Washington authorities, however, on some days the tally would actually increase as Americans came to Saigon to ensure the departure of their Vietnamese relatives and friends, especially those they thought would be in danger.

Even though the embassy staff was steadily shrinking I had remained because I had a role in the final evacuation plan: I was responsible for liaison with certain embassies that had already decided they would leave at the same time we did with American assistance.

### Hard Decisions

My memories of that last day are a series of somewhat disconnected scenes:

When I arrived at the embassy, I found that

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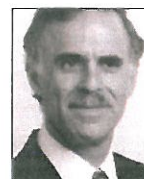
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## F O C U S

employees were barred from parking in the embassy compound and were instead being directed to a lot across the street. This was a significant signal that the evacuation was about to get under way: The parking area inside the compound would be needed as an additional helicopter landing pad. (Later that day, a tree in the embassy parking area was cut down, removing the last obstacle to helicopter flights.)

The walled and protected area of the embassy bounded approximately two acres. The rectangular block of the embassy and separate consular buildings faced Unification Boulevard and formed one complex. Behind this was another grouping including some administrative buildings and a swimming pool, with a back gate. The large Vietnamese crowds that had

*During an elegant  
lunch at a French  
hotel, we saw thick  
black smoke rising  
from the U.S. embassy  
warehouse on the  
other side of the river.*

been gathering around the embassy for weeks seeking entry to the United States soon completely blocked access to the entrance nearest the consular buildings as well as the back gate.

During the night many Americans and Vietnamese, plus a sprinkling of other nationalities, had been brought into the compound, which already contained several thousand people by the time I arrived. Upon arrival, many simply abandoned their cars in the street, so the block in front of the

embassy quickly began to resemble a haphazard parking lot full of luxury vehicles. A company of armed Marines in fatigues manned the perimeter, and entry and exit became very difficult.

Upon entering the embassy, I quickly learned

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from Joe Bennett, the political minister-counselor, that evacuation was indeed the order of the day. Since we had already worked out detailed plans for assisting our diplomatic colleagues to depart, my main task was to notify them that the evacuation was about to start. For several weeks the embassy switchboard had been almost constantly tied up with incoming calls, and I thought I might have to visit the embassies in person to deliver the alerts. But for whatever reason, our telephones were eerily quiet this morning, and I was able to complete the notifications in a few minutes.

A diplomat from the Japanese embassy arrived early in the day in his ambassador's car to discuss the evacuation. Before he could leave, Vietnamese trying to get in the gates surrounded the compound, and he was unable to depart. After consulting his embassy by telephone, he decided to remain in our compound and leave with us. But when we boarded an evacuation vessel that night, we learned the U.S. Navy had received orders, based on Philippine desires, that only Americans could travel to the Philippines, and all other nationalities must be placed on freighters with the Vietnamese refugees and taken to Guam. I heard later that this Japanese diplomat underwent some harrowing experiences before his government was able to locate him and pluck him from a freighter, which made him quite a celebrity in the Japanese diplomatic service.

Early in the day my maid, Nguyet, phoned me, crying, saying she was frightened because the gate guard at my house had fled. It was difficult for me to speak because I was crying too, but I told her the Americans were evacuating and she should take anything in the house she wanted because I would not be back. Later my chauffeur, Mot, called and we arranged to meet at a secluded iron gate to the embassy, where I handed him three months severance pay to distribute to each member of the household staff. I was too choked up to say a word, but we shook hands through the bars.

At one point, a group of distinguished American

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newsmen arrived at the back of the compound seeking to get in. Because of the crush of humanity it was impossible to open the gate, so the journalists with some difficulty were directed to climb a pile of sandbags. From there, the Marines helped them, one-by-one, over the gate. Other American journalists decided to remain in Saigon and were able to chronicle the North Vietnamese takeover the next day.

Later, someone brought to me a somewhat disheveled young Vietnamese man with whitewash marks on his clothing from where he had

climbed over the embassy wall. Nguyen Trong Nho was a member of the lower house of the Vietnamese National Assembly and a friend of mine. In his student years he had been active in protesting against the government of South Vietnam, earning the nickname "King of Street Demonstrations." (It sounds better in Vietnamese.) More recently he had been in the democratic opposition to President Thieu. His family had left the country earlier and he was seeking to join them. To my sorrow, all I could do was give him my emergency food supply — a large jar of peanuts — and wish him well.

At one point I was near the consulate gate when someone in the crowd outside beckoned to me with a discreet gesture. He was a Vietnamese whom I had first known slightly as a colonel, and who had thereafter been promoted to general. He was considered honest (not a universal trait in the South Vietnamese military) and able, and a friend of the Americans who had worked with him. He told me his family was already out of the country, and asked for my assistance in gaining entry to the compound. It was possible for the Marines to let someone in without being forced to shoot people to get the gate closed again, but it was always dicey. I checked with higher authority in the embassy for permission to let him in, but was told the compound was too full to do so, since there was doubt as to whether all those already in the compound could be taken out.

Destruction of classified material was an important activity. The corridor outside the communications center gradually filled with shredded paper. We had been



told some time ago to reduce our files for just this eventuality, so I had just a handful of paper left. I went up on the roof where a young Foreign Service officer, perspiring in the sun and wearing protective gear over his ears, was presiding over a cylindrical machine which produced a loud, high-pitched scream. This machine did not just shred paper but ground it into tiny bits. I threw in my handful, including an address finder with a list of my Vietnamese contacts and their phone numbers — definitely not something I wanted the communists to have — and it disappeared in one shriek.

### **The Evacuation Begins**

Once the tree in the parking lot had been felled, everyone began asking where the helicopters were. The hours seemed to drag on interminably, but finally they began coming about 3:30 p.m., landing alternately in the parking lot and on the roof. The CH-46 and CH-53 helicopters could carry 50 or more people on each trip; once the shuttling operation began, the number of people taken out was impressive.

The embassy was not the only evacuation point on that last day. Military helicopters extracted large numbers of people from the defense attaché's compound near Tan Son Nhut. Helicopters from Air America, the CIA proprietary airline, performed heroic service in picking up people from a number of locations. Some evacuees were taken by bus to board boats in the Saigon River.

The afternoon and evening wore on with the almost constant roar of helicopters pervading the embassy. At first most of the passengers were drawn from the crowds in the compound, but as time went on the evacuation of Americans in the embassy building began, starting with the lower floors.

I was on the fourth floor. When my turn came at about 9 p.m., I walked up the narrow iron ladder to the helicopter pad on the roof and boarded the plane with my small bag. We were strapped into narrow canvas seats along each side, and could see out small windows beside us. As the plane lifted higher, tracers brightened the sky in all directions. The tracers illuminated

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periodic bursts of anti-aircraft fire directed at us, but as we had been assured would happen, they fell short of our altitude.

The North Vietnamese forces had reached the outskirts of Saigon, but now they were pausing to let the Americans get out before resuming their advance. To the east the extensive logistical base at Long Binh, now abandoned, was burning brightly. Forty-five minutes later we landed on the USS Denver in the South China Sea.

This vessel was a landing pad dock, which meant it had a helicopter pad on the deck and a hold containing small boats. The stern of the boat was a large gate, and when it was lowered the boats could sail out. Americans arriving from Saigon remained on the Denver, but Vietnamese and other nationalities were taken below and put on the boats, which took them to freighters destined for Guam, a 10-day trip, where refugee camps had been established. We were told the Philippines had directed that only Americans be brought to their country. This triage was unfortunate, since the other nationalities included individuals such as the Japanese diplomat mentioned before and a French mother and daughter, who certainly would not have caused any immigration problems for the Philippines. I believe that eventually these persons were plucked from the refugee stream before the freighters left the area.

As we landed at night I had only been dimly aware of other vessels in the vicinity. When I came up on deck the next morning, a beautiful sunny day, I found a vast armada of American naval power stretching to the horizon. Interspersed with the naval vessels were the freighters for the Vietnamese refugees.

### **An Era Passes**

The American evacuation by helicopter finally ended in the early hours of April 30, 1975, after the planes' crews had extended themselves far beyond any margin of safety. Ambassador Martin had remained at the embassy until the last possible moment because he felt a strong sense of duty to evacuate the maximum number of Vietnamese. Finally President Ford

ordered him to leave. Once he had departed, the Marines gradually pulled out, leaving the embassy to the crowds in the surrounding streets.

For four days the U.S. naval task force lay off the coast to take on refugees. The first day a cloud of helicopters arrived, bringing the members of the Republic of Vietnam Air Force based in the Delta south of Saigon, along with their families. As the planes landed on the nearby aircraft carrier USS Enterprise, the passengers quickly got off and the helicopters were shoved overboard, because there was no room to park them. The captain of the USS Denver allowed us to watch through a large pair of mounted binoculars on the bridge, so we had front row seats as successive waves of boats brought out more refugees.

Another morning we all gathered at the rail when someone spotted a naked Vietnamese woman swimming around the stern of a nearby freighter. A small boat approached her, but somehow could not get her on board. Then a rope was dropped from the freighter's railing, perhaps 80 feet above the water, and she managed to tie it around herself and was slowly pulled up. When she reached the railing and was helped over, a cheer arose from our group. This was not prurient interest, but a welcome to the triumph of the human spirit.

Life on the ship was uneventful. The hospitality of the U.S. Navy was excellent. When the executive officer of the Denver found I had the equivalent rank of a military officer, he offered me a stateroom on the deck where my peers were gathered. I thanked him but declined the honor, since these staterooms were sweltering and my bunk in the bowels of the ship was deliciously cool.

On the fifth day after leaving Saigon, we set sail for Subic Bay in the Philippines, arriving the next afternoon. We were processed in a gym, and then flown to a naval air station near Manila. From there we were bused to the embassy. After a night in a hotel, I flew to Bangkok the next day and was reunited with my family.

Ambassador Martin was harshly criticized at the

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time for not beginning the American evacuation sooner. Some officials in both Saigon and Washington even went so far as to claim he had been negligent. There is no doubt the final departure was marked by considerable confusion and disorder, and many endangered Vietnamese were left behind. But it must be kept in mind that the situation had to be handled very carefully to avoid our being physically attacked by our erstwhile allies as we left. Some Vietnamese were threatening to hold Americans hostage in the event of an evacuation to ensure they, too, were taken out.

Lower ranking officials such as I were allowed to pack and ship our household effects during the final weeks, but the top embassy officers, and especially the ambassador, had to avoid any move in this direction for fear of starting a panic. In the end, all Americans who wanted to leave were able to do so. I believe Ambassador Martin was vindicated by the final result.

The United States became involved in Vietnam at a time when we considered ourselves engaged in a worldwide competition with a monolithic communist enemy seeking world domination. There were active communist insurgencies in all of Vietnam's neighbors, and in 1965 a communist coup attempt in Indonesia almost succeeded. The introduction of American combat troops into Vietnam that same year received widespread public and press support.

As I mounted the steps to the helicopter 10 years after American troops first came to Vietnam, the United States had positive relations with both the Soviet Union and China, who had serious differences with each other. With the obvious exceptions of Cambodia and Laos, Vietnam's neighbors were set on non-communist paths. With these shifts in the world strategic situation, Vietnam became of much less importance to the United States. But those of us who spent years of our lives there will not forget the attractiveness, intelligence and energy of the Vietnamese people. Nor will we ever forget those Vietnamese who believed in and worked for democracy, and whose hopes were ended when America withdrew. ■