

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 1

CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR
26 April 1985

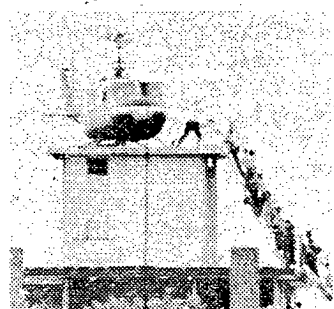
One man remembers the fall of Saigon 10 years later

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Special to The Christian Science Monitor

Bangkok, Thailand

I was slow to realize that the war was ending. In fact, I only began to take the idea seriously after watching the country's second city, Da Nang, fall apart.

It was late March, and I was working for the American Friends Service Committee, a Quaker relief organization. Our six-person team had evacuated, temporarily we thought, from the Vietnamese town of Quang Ngai.



UPI/FILE PHOTO

April 29, 1975: Americans line up to be airlifted from Saigon by helicopter

Almost as soon as we reached Saigon, two of us decided to go back. We had salaries to pay at the service committee's rehabilitation center. Besides, we were curious.

All went well as far as Da Nang. Quang Ngai had fallen, so we contacted the underground.

The other side had no objection to our trip, we were told. But there was fighting on the road: We'd have to wait.

US officials at the consulate general in Da Nang were also counseling patience. The city was choked with the remnants of divisions of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam — the South Vietnamese forces.

We saw a policeman wander by — still in uniform, carrying an M-16 rifle and a briefcase, but barefooted. Yet consulate officials sounded confident. The government would hold the city for a couple of months and move 250,000 people to safe zones, they said. On no account should anyone pull out — this would cause panic. Shortly afterward the city collapsed.

It was not attacked — the North Vietnamese army had not yet reached the city. It simply disintegrated. One morning I heard shots, looked out of my bedroom window, and saw South Vietnamese troops striding drunkenly down the street, spraying the shuttered shophouses with rifle fire.

We packed up and headed for the main Buddhist pagoda. As we were about to leave by the front door of the hotel, the manager stopped us. The sol-

diers had just shot someone there, she said, and she led us to a side exit.

Ahead of us, walking in the direction of the pagoda, were several armed, drunken soldiers. We walked slowly down the street behind them, keeping close to the wall and praying they would not turn around.

They didn't.

The word from the consulate now was to leave immediately.

We spent our last night in Da Nang in a US residence called "the Alamo." I found myself sitting next to group of quiet, friendly Filipinos. They said they were accountants but I noticed later they were well armed. They were CIA contract staff.

In the middle of the night we were told an evacuation by air was impossible: South Vietnamese troops were running wild in the airbase. We would leave by sea.

Before light we were driven in a closed truck to the wharf. Open barges, already overflowing with what seemed to be several thousand people each, were moored, waiting. Anonymous hands took our bags and pulled us up. When our bags were passed back a few minutes later the salary

money — several months' pay for some 50 staff members — was gone.

Others were much less fortunate: Several people, we were told, had been crushed when they fell in the water between barge and wharf.

Off the coast we met the US Lines cargo ship Pioneer Contender. The small group of Westerners and Filipinos were led to a rope ladder guarded by an armed marine in civilian clothes. He covered us while we boarded the ship, holding off other refugees with his rifle.

By now we were moving at what seemed full speed, and the ship began to take on the rest of the refugees,

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gangway. There was panic as everyone rushed for the steps. The US marines handling the embarkation could not speak Vietnamese: They menacingly shouted or stomped on fingers when someone tried to jump the line. At one point they turned fire hoses on the refugees. Someone was reported overboard. But the ship kept going.

As the afternoon wore on, the swells became higher. The barge, slowly lightened of its load, began to pitch dramatically. We went down the gangway and formed a human chain, pulling people up onto the ship. When the empty barge was cut loose, it was piled high with belongings — suitcases, televisions, a motorscooter.

We spent the night in the open air, arrived in Cam Ranh the next morning, and then flew back to Saigon. The city was crowded but surprisingly calm and normal.

In the final days I began to work as an interpreter for the BBC. On April 27 we decided to go to Bien Hoa, about 20 miles north of the capital. We did not get very far: Just a few miles outside of town, next

to the imposing US-built Newport bridge, guerrillas had cut the highway.

Finally the South Vietnamese troops decided it was safe to advance. We went with them, and got partway up the slope of the bridge before automatic fire opened up. I seemed to spend an excessive amount of the day lying on my stomach on the burning hot pavement of the bridge.

The skies were overcast when I got back to Saigon, the rains were due any day now.

Downtown I bought a paper: Duong Van Minh (Big Minh) had been inaugurated that afternoon, the third president in a week.

As I glanced at the paper, I bumped into a Vietnamese journalist. "You'd better look out tonight," he warned, "Nguyen Cao Ky [head of the South Vietnamese Air Force] is planning a coup."

I went to President Minh's house, half a block or so from the presidential palace, to say hello. A bunch of the new ministers

were two activist opposition members of the National Assembly, Ho Ngoc Nhuan and Ly Qui Chung.

The underground had offered to get Nhuan out of the city before the final offensive, but he had refused. The only thing left to do was to try to end the war with as little bloodshed as possible, he said.

He and others would try to persuade Minh to surrender quickly. Yet he was not sure that all members of Minh's government were so peaceably inclined.

As we talked, the skies began to rumble. "That's bombing," Chung said. We laughed at his nervousness; it was thunder, we replied.

The rumbling came closer. Chung was right, we decided — it was bombing. We ran outside and saw an A-37 fighter circling above the city. The anti-aircraft guns at the palace opened up, so, it seemed, did the heavily armed troops in the area. We ran for cover. Nhuan, another opposition deputy, and I took shelter under a sink.

But it was not the expected coup. The planes were flown by members of the North Vietnamese Air Force and led by one of the enemy's moles in the Saigon regime, Air Force pilot Nguyen Thanh Trung.

During a lull in the firing I decided to go home.

The next morning I went downtown to say goodbye to some journalist friends leaving on the evacuation. The streets were much quieter than usual — a 24-hour curfew had been announced — but by no means deserted.

As I passed the cathedral, I looked to my left. There seemed to be quite a big crowd of people by the US Embassy. This was my only glimpse of the images of panic that came to symbolize the fall of Saigon. The rest of the city was calm.

On the 30th, just as it seemed that Saigon was going to turn into the last charnel house of the war, President Minh surrendered.

After the surrender was announced we mounted the red, blue, and gold flag of the titular victor, the Provisional Revolutionary Government on our car and prepared to drive around town.

We were joined by a Vietnamese friend. Crippled since childhood, he had been part of the Saigon student peace movement. Arrested for translating a publication of the US peace movement, he was accused of being a communist and tortured. He had spent more than a year in prison. When he left prison, he was a member of the underground.

He joined us that day rather shyly carrying a rifle. "Do you know how to use one of these?" he asked. No. "Neither do I," he said and tucked it out of harm's way.

We seemed to be out on the streets a little early. The gutters were full of uniforms, an armored personnel carrier stood abandoned outside our back alley, but not all South Vietnamese troops had dispersed.

I looked in the rearview mirror and saw a truckload of troops behind us. They would probably not appreciate our flag, I thought. My friend asked me to slow down. "I'd like to talk to them," he said. I tried to calmly obey. The truck pulled alongside. The soldiers in it did not look as if they wanted to continue the war.

"Do you know where Van Hanh University is?" my friend asked them. They did not. "Well, follow us," he said, "and point your guns in the air, you can dump your guns there." They did so.

There was still fighting downtown. We ran into some of North Vietnamese soldiers pinned down near a large US residence. We later heard it was a CIA residence where employees had assembled for evacuation but had been forgotten. The soldiers were understandably busy but quite polite. We went on our way.

Back at the university the courtyard was full of surrendered weapons. In one corner the body of a student lay on the back a pickup truck. He had called on a South Vietnamese tank to surrender, we were told, but had been killed.

Outside the North Vietnamese tanks were clattering past, heading downtown. Then a couple of guerrillas shambled into the university courtyard, accompanying a very pretty woman cadre. She looked at home in a student setting — she was perhaps a graduate of the urban student movement. Very confidently she took charge of the university and the pile of abandoned weapons.

The change had begun.