

A Time for Leaving at Former

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SAIGON, April 27—"How do you do, ladies?" blurted the American lieutenant colonel with hearty bonhomie at two waitresses sitting at a table in the compact cafeteria that serves the giant American headquarters complex at Tansonnhut air-base.

"We die," answered one of the waitresses, fingering a paper napkin.

"Die?" said the lieutenant colonel, sitting down with apparent concern at the formica-topped table. He mused somberly: "Die, die, die . . . once you die, you don't come back, *fini!*"

All three giggled.

During many years of the American involvement here, this massive prefabricated building was known as

"Pentagon East". Gens. William Westmoreland and Creighton Abrams had their offices here. In these yellow, plasticine hallways, the loudest noises traditionally have been the click of military boots on the rubberized flooring and the quiet, cool hum of giant air conditioners somewhere in the distance.

The headquarters used to be known as MACV for Military Assistance Command—Vietnam. After the American withdrawal two years ago, it became DAO for the Defense Attache's Office of the U.S. embassy.

Civilians, many of them retired military men, came to staff it then and the maze of offices and meeting rooms from which the American combat role in the war had been directed be-

came primarily a logistical center in which Americans worked to keep military supplies flowing smoothly to the South Vietnamese.

Now the world is changing again, and the scene between the lieutenant colonel and the two waitresses is one of the least strange here as this headquarters is preparing for the final evacuation, the final act in a decade of intense American involvement in the Vietnam war.

Many of the offices are already closed and Americans in the final stages of departure rush through the hallways.

Marines have been brought in small groups from the large fleet waiting off the Vietnamese coast to police the complex.

"If they attack this base, they're in trouble," said one of the Marines, eating a hamburger in the cafeteria. "This is U.S. property."

His companion added: "We got a whole fleet of ships out there. Man, when the stone drops, it's going to be like the beginning of World War III."

Down the hall, some Vietnamese workers were hurried pushing an electronic computer console toward a packing area. Postal clerks were throwing large packages onto rollers that carried them to trucks outside. "I guess the post office is open," said one, "but we're just going on an hour-by-hour basis."

DAO commander Gen. Homer Smith granted a brief interview in order to dispel false reports that DAO had already closed.

"We're still ordering materiel from the States and still receiving it under the \$700 million program already authorized by Congress last year," he said. "Two ships are unloading at Vungtau right now."

The road from Saigon to Vungtau, the capital's last road link with the sea, was

cut Saturday by Communist forces. Some Communist tanks are fighting only 18 miles east of Saigon on this road.

There are still about 350 Americans working at DAO, Smith said, or about one-third the normal number. He said he did not think there would be any reduction in this number "for a while."

Smith said that besides supplying the South Vietnamese, he is also working hard on the continuing evacuation of Americans and Vietnamese.

Outside the headquarters, the tennis courts have been cleared of their nets and high chain-link fences that surrounded them so that they can serve as helicopter landing pads if there is an emergency evacuation.

'Pentagon East'

Sunday afternoon an American soldier with a bullhorn was standing in the middle of this empty space checking to see how far his voice would carry. Other Americans in civilian clothes and carrying walkie-talkies were walking around checking their use from different positions.

Several hundred yards from the main headquarters building is a large American recreational area—an Olympic-sized swimming pool, more tennis courts, gymnasium, bowling alley, post exchange and "stop-n-shop" liquor store and delicatessen. The buildings are prefabricated like the headquarters, and the area has always had a sterile air about it by comparison with the rich sprawl of Vietnamese life outside.

Now it is the staging area

for the exodus of refugees. Sunday, 10,000 Vietnamese and a few Americans waited for their flights.

They filled some of the tennis courts, sitting on their suitcases, saying little and waiting as the Marines, with M-16 rifles slung over their shoulders and knives and flashlights hooked to their web belts, directed the flow of traffic through the area.

Overhead the giant C-5 U.S. Air Force jet transports roared down in tight circles to land, discharge their cargoes of military equipment and pick up their human cargoes. South Vietnamese Air Force F-5 fighter-bombers, supplied by the Americans, screamed over low, flying tight protective patterns around the airport perimeter.