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10 Years of the Wrong

By Peter Arnett
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Saigon

Ten years ago I watched the first U.S. Marines arrive to help South Vietnam. They were greeted on the beaches by pretty Vietnamese girls in white silken robes who draped flower leis around their necks.

A decade has passed.

And yesterday I watched U.S. Marines shepherding the last Americans out of South Vietnam. They were the same, clean-cut looking young men of a decade ago.

But the Vietnamese were different.

Those who didn't have a place on the last helicopters out of Saigon — and there were thousands of them left behind — hooted, booed and scuffled with the U.S. Marines guarding the landing zones.

Some Vietnamese threw themselves over walls and wire fences, only to be thrown back by the Marines.

Bloodshed was avoided seemingly only by good luck and bad aim on the part of some angry Vietnamese soldiers who shot at a few buses and departing helicopters.

But the whole, frantic dash from Saigon by the Americans — and the bitter resentment of the thousands of Vietnamese who couldn't go — seemed a sad but accurate reflection of what relations between Americans and Vietnamese had come to in the ten years since those flowers were gladly given to the Marines.

Americans and the South Vietnamese used to get along pretty well. That was in the days when the U.S. Marines first arrived in Viet-

nam, imbued with a determination to see the war through.

The South Vietnamese army, dispirited then, watched with wonder as first the Marines and then the paratroopers and the American infantry came to

steaming hot Vietnam to trudge the coastal plains and mountain valleys in a punishing, unfamiliar environment.

Vietnamese officers began aping the American way. The Americans seemed always to have better pressed

uniforms and more detailed maps and diagrams.

Nearly 20,000 Vietnamese officers flew to the United States for education or advanced training, and they returned with American slang expressions and an American taste for firepow-



A U.S. Marine in Saigon pushed away Vietnamese trying to board an evacuation bus

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er and massive military supplies.

Something went wrong along the way. To win a war like the one in Vietnam, the subject to study was not the American way but the Communist Vietnamese way. They were launching the war in their own country.

The South Vietnamese instead learned the American way to use firepower, blasting at the other side with planes and artillery, effective only so long as there were bombs and shells.

Saigon also tasted the luxury of the American way, with massive quantities of bombs and equipment. And this was to end, also.

One factor that surely sustained the South Vietnamese for long years after the American ground troops left was hope that the U.S. would continue to help one way or the other. Or at least save everyone at the last minute.

That hope died for many yesterday.

The days preceeding the evacuation were eyeopeners for Americans who had any faith left in the ability of the South Vietnamese high command.

This reporter lunched with a three-star general with critical responsibilities for the defense of Saigon, and he matter of factly explained his own plan of retreat.

He would simply have his helicopter pilot follow the U.S. Marine helicopters ferrying evacuees to Seventh Fleet carriers offshore, and set down with them. But what about the defense of the city for which he would be responsible after the Americans left?

"Don't you see," he said, "this will be my last chance to get to the United States. I know I can make money there by writing about my successful military campaigns."

Yesterday the general followed the Marines to the carriers.

Two colonels on his staff had less resources. But they simply coralled this reporter outside one of the press buses, changed their uniforms into civilian attire on the curbside, and mingled with the newsmen climbing aboard.

Many thousands of officers in the Saigon army had apparently been promised passage out, or believed that they qualified for it. But the evacuation came so quickly that only a small percentage could be moved.

A Vietnamese infantry colonel complained bitterly that he had been left behind despite a promise "from a friend high in the American CIA."

This sort of bitterness must be felt by thousands of other Vietnamese officers who worked with the American advisers over the years and began believing in "the American way" of doing things.
