

2 Aides Stage Dime-Store Novel Viet Rescue

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By Marilyn Berger  
Washington Post Staff Writer

Using their own money and ingenuity and despite the displeasure of the State Department, two young Foreign Service officers flew to Saigon and got about 200 Vietnamese friends out of the country in the last days before South Vietnam's surrender.

Larry Craig Johnstone and Lionel A. Rosenblatt said they believed their friends' lives were in danger but that they were not high-

ranking enough to get on the U.S. evacuation flights without help.

The rescue involved dramatic races through Saigon in a black 1940s Citroen with escapees hidden in the trunk, falsified papers, lack of sleep and hunger.

Johnstone, 32, answered questions about his adventure at his Washington home. Rosenblatt, 31, stayed on Guam to continue to try to reunite Vietnamese families separated in the confusion of the evacuation.

"They were good friends and they worked with us," Johnstone said of the Vietnamese.

"To leave them and not express the slightest concern was repugnant to us. There were many who felt there was nothing they could do. But we knew Saigon, we spoke Vietnamese and we felt we could do something," he said.

"They were not the only Foreign Service officers who tried. Johnstone said about 40 Americans were on

the plane he and Rosenblatt took to Saigon. Among them were four other officers who had come from other parts of the world to help their Vietnamese friends. He would not identify them.

"We had grave reservations when we left, fear of becoming a burden to the embassy, which didn't need another burden, concern that we wouldn't get anyone out, realization that we'd be spending a lot of money possibly for nothing and jeopardizing ourselves in the

process," Johnstone said. "But we wouldn't have gone if we thought we'd fail."

They took part of their annual leave "for personal reasons" and did not fall anyone at the State Department where they were going. When their superiors discovered they had gone to Vietnam, the State Department cabled the embassy ordering that they be stopped.

According to top department officials, the embassy made a brief effort to find

See RESCUE, A16, Col. 3

# Two Stage 'Dime-Store Novel'

## RESCUE, From AI

them and then turned to its more urgent problems, cabling back that the two had gone "underground."

Johnstone said he believes he will get into trouble with the State Department because of what he did. But he felt he had no moral alternative.

When they left April 20 Johnstone and Rosenblatt said they thought they would have only a day or two to reach the people they wanted to help. But the Communist advance slowed and they had five days for their efforts, which Johnstone said became like "a dime-store novel."

On arriving in Saigon, the pair stopped at a street corner stand and bought bowls of soup—which turned out to be almost all they got to

eat, during the four days. Johnstone lost about 10 pounds.

They checked into the Caravelle Hotel, which they had hoped to use as a staging area for evacuees, but after deciding it was too public, they took over an abandoned Agency for International Development apartment. Then the cloak-and-dagger work began.

They made their first contact directly, then tried to use only Vietnamese to contact other Vietnamese. They met their friends in the crowds in front of the post office or the national cathedral—some of the Vietnamese contacted knew Rosenblatt, some knew Johnstone, but few knew both.

The method: Rosenblatt would give the person a note telling him to meet Johnstone at the Continental Hotel. He would know Johnstone because he would be wearing a brown coat.

Johnstone keenly remembers sitting in the Saigon heat sweltering in his brown coat. At other times he had to wait on street corners,

where, in addition to the coat, Rosenblatt had arranged for him to be carrying his briefcase—which he said weighed about 15 pounds.

Each Vietnamese contacted was informed that the two Americans could arrange transportation out. Johnstone said there was no problem getting space on evacuation planes, for they were going out partially empty. The principal problem was getting the Vietnamese to Tansonhut airfield, because the national police were being very strict.

Johnstone said they scrounged up an old typewriter and the necessary forms and did the required paperwork. Occasionally, Johnstone, recalls, he dozed off over the typewriter, for the only sleep he got in the four days was 2½ hours, and that was in the pin-setting mechanism of a bowling alley at Tansonhut.

All of the Vietnamese, Johnstone said, faced difficult decisions. "There was a sense of obligation to country, to fam-

ily." But only seven or eight of those contacted chose to stay.

"We were being very cautious, even a little paranoid," said Johnstone, smiling. "We didn't want to be discovered by the national police."

The Americans picked up those who wanted to go in the Citroen or in an abandoned Pan American bus they appropriated.

They brought the Vietnamese, with their families and the few belongings they could carry, to the AID apartment, going up and down another to avoid detection, filled out the forms, and when enough people were assembled, took them to the airfield and the evacuation planes.

In all, they got out about 20 Vietnamese who were in what they considered the "high risk" category, and their families, a total of

lies, a total of 200. At first they limited them to immediate family members. When they found there was space for more they went back for aunts and grandparents.

When time was running out,

# Rescue of Viets

they stopped the street-corner meetings and went directly to the homes of the Vietnamese, announcing that they could help them get out of the country and giving them five minutes to decide.

In retrospect, Johnstone, said it was all very "melodramatic," "not very Foreign Service."

No one has told him it was a foolish thing to do since he returned, although he thinks it was foolish. "We thought it was insane the whole time we were doing it," he said.

Johnstone is now at Fort Chaffee, Ark., helping set up a refugee center. He is one of the three assistants to Ambassador L. Dean Brown, who heads the Vietnam refugee task force.

He spent five years in Vietnam, winning three awards for his work there. It was his job to do "critical evaluation," and, he recalled, "that was not a hard job in Vietnam." His awards include one from the State Department for "constructive dissent."

Johnstone worked in the

Mekong Delta and then in Saigon, and he said he was able to help improve the lives of at least some Vietnamese during the course of the struggle, and perhaps to ward off bombing raids in populated areas.

It was during those years that he met the Vietnamese who became his friends, "honorable decent men who deserve to be saved."

Johnstone said he and Rosenblatt came out of Saigon without using an evacuation plane but he wouldn't say how. Now that he is back he said he is disheartened with the attitude he finds here. He conceded that there are a lot of Vietnamese "fat cats" who benefitted from the war.

But, he said, "I wish the American people would know that there are a lot of Vietnamese who are honest and who had humanitarian objectives and strong feelings of anti-communism and that they worked hard with us and that we have a residual obligation to help them."