

Aboard the American Fleet, The Flotsam of a Generation

By H. D. S. Greenway
Washington Post Foreign Service

**ABOARD THE USS
BLUE RIDGE. May 1**
(delayed in transmission)—
The horizon is crowded with
the ships of an American
battle fleet circling slowly
in the South China Sea off
the Vietnamese coast. They
are picking up thousands of
refugees who are drifting in
small boats, many of them
filled to the gunwales and
out of food and water, the
flotsam left from the wreck-
age of a quarter century of
American involvement in
Vietnam.

For two days now helicop-
ters and a few fixed-wing air-
craft of the Vietnamese air
force have been trying to
land on the American carri-
ers 50 or more miles off the
coast in a last desperate
flight from the mainland.

Some of them, borne like
butterflies on an off shore
wind, have lost their way
and crashed at sea. Some of

the helicopters have landed
but there is no room for the
machines themselves and
many have been pushed
overboard as soon as their
crews and passengers are
free of them.

Some of the Vietnamese
helicopters are saved, how-
ever, and the sailors paint
over their markings—oblit-
erating the red and yellow
colors of a republic that
ceased to exist sometime on
Wednesday when the South
Vietnamese surrendered in
Saigon.

The American ambassador
to South Vietnam, Graham
Martin, is aboard this ship,
Gray-faced and sick with
pneumonia, he told report-
ers last night that America
need not have left Vietnam
in the manner it did if only
it had lived up to its com-
mitments.

Others have said that the
seeds of Saigon's destruc-
tion were always present
and evidenced by the fact
that, after all these years of

assistance, successive re-
gimes have never given the
country social justice or a
government in which any
but the corrupt could be-
lieve. America could post-
pone the Vietnamese revolu-
tion but not prevent it and
today the American em-
bassy in Saigon lies looted—
torn apart by the Vietnam-
ese who had been left be-
hind.

For a war that had gone
on for more than a genera-
tion, the end came with as-
tonishing speed. In barely
six weeks the entire edifice
had collapsed, from the first
mishandled retreat from the
Central Highlands to the
sight of North Vietnamese
trucks and tanks entering
Saigon.

The last day of the Ameri-
can involvement began with
a heavy shelling of Tanson-
nhut airport. We wake at
four in the morning listen-
ing to the sounds of the
shells and rockets exploding
and it seemed as if there
were two or three coming in
every five seconds. Most of
us knew then that it was the
end. A bombardment of that
magnitude meant that the
North Vietnamese had lost
patience with the long-

Vietcong Repair U.S. Materiel

American military equipment worth an estimated \$100 million was left behind in Hue, reports AP correspondent Daniel De Luce, and is now being spruced up by Vietcong Forces and by South Vietnam soldiers who surrendered.

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Flotsam Of War Gathered

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winded and futile efforts of the South Vietnamese to install a government of surrender and that the final attack on Saigon had begun.

Reporters began to gather nervously in the halls of their hotels before dawn. They packed their bags, looking underneath the bed for a lost sock, and doing all the inexplicable trivial things that people often do in emergencies because their minds cannot quite comprehend that none of the trivial things of normal life matter any more.

Such incongruities happened throughout the day. The white suited clerks at the front desk of the Continental Palace Hotel were carefully adding up each account by hand while mobs of people were trying to press packets of piasters upon them in an effort to get away quickly.



A photo released by Hanoi's Vietnam News Agency and monitored in Tokyo is said to picture the surrender on

April 30 of former South Vietnamese President Duong Van (Big) Minh, center, head bowed, and his Cabinet.

Associated Press

The North Vietnamese artillery barrage began to slaken with the oncoming dawn and reporters, on the top of the Caravelle Hotel, saw the disturbing sight of South Vietnamese planes being shot out of the sky with heat-seeking missiles. Everyone knew that the evacuation would have to be by helicopter and, if the North Vietnamese wanted to do so, they could shoot down many of the helicopters.

It was not until morning that the evacuation order was given and Americans and other foreigners who wanted to go began assembling at staging places around the city. From there they would be taken to the defense attache's compound, near the airport. Others

went straight to the American embassy. The last minutes were spent wishing good luck to Vietnamese and foreign friends who were staying behind.

At first the city was calm. But as the hours went by the word began to spread that the Americans were leaving and great crowds began to gather outside the locked gates of the embassy grounds. All that day and night they pressed against each other crying and pleading to be let in.

Families became separated, and even Vietnamese who had papers promising them they could go could not get in.

A well-dressed man in civilian clothes came close to the gate and, making sure none of the others could see what he was doing, showed us a note saying he was a brigadier general and named an American official whom he begged us to contact.

And when the helicopters began to arrive, landing in the chancery parking lot and on the roof, the people

outside just stood and stared. The wind from the rotors lashed the well-manicured bushes and flower beds like the breath of a hurricane and the shredded documents of the American decade burst from their burn bags and blew up and over the gates in a snow of confetti.

In the end, when even

some Vietnamese who had been admitted to the embassy realized they were going to be left behind, the looting began. The American evacuees and the Marines, as their numbers thinned, gave ground slowly and locked themselves into the main building in order to leave by the roof. They retreated upwards floor by floor until the last of them was gone in the morning light of Wednesday as the North Vietnamese were entering the city. *30 APR*

We left as night was falling in a helicopter whose nervous gunner asked where the fighting was. But there was no fighting in the city that day, only despair, panic and a few shots fired into the air.

Our helicopter flew over the twin steeples of Saigon's main Roman Catholic cathedral and we could take a last look down Tu Do Street, wet with rain. Beyond us, to the northeast, an ammunition dump was exploding and there were other fires on the far horizon.

Many of the Americans who left that day had spent

a decade or more wrapped up in the problems of Vietnam. Some had supported the American effort, others had become convinced that only by leaving could American help the Vietnamese. But none who crossed the coast that night in the gathering dark with Vietnam burning and exploding behind remained unaffected at the manner of our leaving.