

Last Marine's Saigon Saga

By Major Jim Kean
United Press

Aboard USS Blue Ridge

I had the dubious distinction of being the last marine to leave Vietnam.

We knew the end was near on Monday evening when planes bombed Tan Son Nhut airport and firing broke out downtown, all around the embassy. We went on full alert then. I had 42 marines on duty at the embassy compound. The others were at the DAO (Defense Attache Office) compound at the airport, which was to be the main staging area for the final evacuation, according to our original plan.

Long before the final evacuation was ordered, we had close to 2000 people already in the embassy compound.

A crowd gathered outside the embassy then. Tuesday morning there were several hundred people there and by the late afternoon the number had grown to at least 10,000 even by the most conservative estimate.

Our original plan was to evacuate everybody but about 100 marines and embassy staff members by bus to DAO.

But it was soon obvious that we

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would have to evacuate far more than 100 by helicopter. We cut down a huge tree in the compound and shrubbery to make a landing zone for the CH-53 choppers (the largest helicopters used in the evacuation operation, which normally carry about 50 passengers).

The embassy roof could handle choppers up to the size of CH-46s (which carry about 20 passengers). My mission was to hold the compound during the evacuation, to protect the ambassador and to keep people in the embassy if we had to give up the compound.

At first, after the evacuation order came (around 10 a.m.), we were admitting people through the embassy gates who had American passports, who were third country nationals or

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Vietnamese with evacuation authorization documents. But the pressures became so great from the mob trying to get inside that we had to lock the gates and amend our orders only to take Americans and third country nationals.

It was around 3 p.m. that I saw the first choppers going into the DAO compound (at the airport) and I realized that the evacuation had really begun.

I called DAO and asked for diversion of some of the choppers to begin the embassy evacuation.

I also asked for additional marines to help secure the embassy area. We were drawing considerable fire from outside the embassy and the crowd was growing larger and more dangerous.

We worked the landing zones in the compound and on the roof from around 7 until 10 p.m. with choppers

coming in at about ten-minute intervals. Then the pace picked up. The choppers were coming in as fast as we could handle them.

By 11 p.m. we had sent out around 1600 but the crowd awaiting evacuation was as large as ever.

They just kept coming in over the walls. We were helping Americans outside get over the walls. My marines were standing on each other's shoulders to reach over the wall and pull up any American or anybody who looked like an American.

We pulled them up by the hair, by the arms, by the shirt collar, anyway we could if they could fight their way near enough for us to reach them.

Sometime around 4 a.m. Wednesday I noticed a lull in the arrival of heavy choppers. There was a CH-46 on the roof. I sensed that we might be out of choppers. I called the sergeant on the roof and asked

if the ambassador had left. He said yes, the ambassador had left with the flag. (Ambassador Graham Martin also had left with his servant and poodle.)

I told him (the sergeant) to hold the bird. I went up and spoke to the general (Marine Brigadier General Richard Carey, commanding the Ninth Marine Amphibious Brigade) on the radio.

The general said the only lifts from then would be to pull out the marines and any U.S. personnel remaining.

I passed word by word of mouth to all marines in the compound perimeter to withdraw in a circle formation. They began the withdrawal from the walls, backing in tight formation.

As soon as that began, the gates gave way. There still were at least 10,000 or more people around the embassy. About 75 per cent of my marines were inside by then. The remaining 25 per cent had to make a forceful entry into the embassy through the mob.

They did it with fisticuffs, pushing, shoving, anything but firing, to get inside.

I put two embassy seabees on the elevator and they took it to the sixth (the top) floor to freeze it there. The marines used the stairwells to withdraw floor by floor up to the roof.

They were just getting to the second door when someone drove a huge water truck through the main entrance, into the embassy lobby. The crowd surged into the building.

I got all the marines onto the roof. We locked and secured the entrances to the roof. I ordered my marines to discard their helmets and

flak jackets to cut down on weight. By then there were 31 of us left.

It was about 6:30 a.m. the crowd was trying to get to the roof but most of them were looting, taking everything they could take from the embassy. We used heavy duty fire extinguisher equipment to keep them off the stairs to the roof.

When the next chopper came to take out 20 more marines, those from the fleet went first. The embassy security guard marines had asked that they be the last to leave. It was their embassy. That was sometime between 6 and 7 p.m.

All the time there was heavy fire coming from all directions.

We waited about an hour before the last chopper came. That was the longest hour we had ever spent. I ordered CS gas (tear gas) fired into the stairwells. Everybody in the compound and the building had weapons by then. I think their interest in looting diverted their attention and attack from us.

The last chopper came at 7:58 a.m. I checked my watch, emptied my .45 into the antenna mechanism and boarded the chopper last.

Just before I got aboard, one of the embassy marines looked at me and said, "What kind of pizza do you want when we get to Su-bic?"

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