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**Reporter's Notebook: Six Days  
In the Evacuation From Saigon**

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**ABOARD U.S.S. BLUE RIDGE** in the South China Sea, May 4—The last day began precisely at 4 A.M. on April 29, Saigon awoke to the heaviest rocket attack of the war. First six rockets, then 22, then dozens more slammed into Tan Son Nhut airport.

By the time I stopped counting at 6 A.M., 140 rockets had hit the sprawling airbase and the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff headquarters adjoining it.

Several thousand Americans and Vietnamese waiting to be evacuated from Tan

Son Nhut by United States Air Force planes were trapped in the barrage. So were the nearly 200 delegates of the Provisional Revolutionary Government and of North Vietnam who lived in an old United States Army compound at Tan Son Nhut as representatives to the Joint Military Commission established by the Paris peace accords. Miraculously only a handful of evacuees and none of the Communists were hit.

From the roof of the Caravelle Hotel downtown, the red flashes of exploding rockets could be seen mixed with trails of tracer bullets from South Vietnamese planes.

As dawn rose, its own fiery red, a Strella heat-seeking rocket hit a helicopter gunship and turned it into a flaming red ball.

By 6:30, the American Embassy, in consultation with Secretary of State Kissinger and Adm. Noel A. M. Gaylor, Commander-in-Chief of United States forces in the Pacific, had decided to "pull the plug," or evacuate the 900 Americans still in Saigon.

Ambassador Graham A. Martin, who had long resisted pressure from Washington to take the final step because he feared it would destroy what was left of South Vietnamese

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morale, was too sick to come to the phone to talk with Admiral Gaylor. Instead, an assistant spoke with the admiral.

According to diplomats who took part in the discussions, it was decided that the Communists were not after all interested in peace talks but were planning to take Saigon by force. For over a week there had been signals from Hanoi, Moscow and North Vietnamese diplomats in Paris that the Communists were more interested in a political than a military settlement. "We were sold a line, and we were so anxious to save face that we were taken in," said one angry United States official.

The evacuation decision was kept secret, even from other Americans. At 9:30 a correspondent who had been up almost all night filing his story and covering the rocket attack, was told by a senior embassy official that the decision had been not to pull the plug. Confident that he would have another day in Saigon, the correspondent went out for a delayed breakfast.

#### Looted Food on Sale

There was little traffic in the streets Tuesday morning since rockets were still falling sporadically at Tan Son Nhut and the city was theoretically under a 24-hour

curfew. But behind the zoo, people were selling food stolen from the American commissary the day before when commandos broke into the area. Looters were offering beer, steak, Sara Lee cakes, and frozen orange juice for next to nothing.

At 11 A.M. a correspondent tried to set out by car to take pictures of the looted goods, but his white Volkswagen wouldn't start. While he tried to make it go, another newsman ran up the street and gave him a thumbs-up signal; he had heard from still another newsman that the evacuation was on. But a call to the US consulate to confirm it reached no one.

The correspondents gathered up their most valuable notes and hurried to the Caravelle Hotel to pack their few belongings in airlines bags. In five minutes they were back downstairs to pay their bills, all carefully made out, including the stamp tax. A Vietnamese assistant took one last picture and threw them the roll of film. They then walked off to the embassy's planned evacuation point.

The first, near the Saigon navy base, was empty. A second one on Gia Long Street was jammed with other correspondents. The door to the building, an embassy housing complex, was locked, so the anxious exacees had to wait outside, attracting a huge crowd of Vietnamese, some of whom joined the Americans.

When old United States Army buses finally arrived at 12:15 to pick up the people, there was room for only half the evacuees. Some people went back to their offices or hotels in discouragement.

The trip to Tan Son Nhut, normally 15 to 20 minutes, took over an hour because the buses, driven by marine security guards, headed in the wrong direction and drove down one-way streets the wrong way.

When we finally arrived at the yellow Defense Attachés Office, which used to be U.S. military headquarters for Vietnam and was known as Pentagon East, a rocket wooshed overhead and exploded a few hundred feet away in the terminal of Air America, starting a large fire. Earlier Vietnamese officers had commandeered four Air America helicopters that were to serve in the evacuation and flown them out to the Seventh Fleet in the South China Sea.

As we disembarked from the bus, a South Vietnamese C-119 gunship was hit by a Strella missile over Cho Lon, the Chinese section of Saigon. It had taken off only a minute before from Tan Son Nhut. Just after we had taken our eyes off it there had been a loud explosion. Only a cloud of black smoke remained.

Marine guards immediately herded us into the Defense Attachés Office, a cavernous building built with an infinite number of corridors and, luckily, a heavily reinforced roof, which made it a good bomb shelter.

Inside were several thousand people: marines in green jungle camouflage uniforms, newsmen, nervous looking Vietnamese men, women and children, Vietnamese generals and their families, and embassy secretaries. Everywhere there was suitcases that their owners had abandoned when told that there would be no room for them aboard the helicopters.

We were given numbers and divided into groups of 50 for rides on Air Force or Marine helicopters. When the time came to dash out to a waiting helicopter, we turned a corner in the building.

"We've just turned the corner in Vietnam, and there's light at the end of the tunnel," a newsmen said. In fact, at the end of the corridor were the green helicopters in the Defense Attachés office parking lot, their rotors whirling.



In panic, South Vietnamese civilians scaled wall of U.S. Embassy in Saigon last Tuesday

Associated Press

From the building to the helicopters was a 75 yard dash. Several hundred marines were lying on the ground, holding bazookas, mortars, machine guns and M-16 automatic rifles. A few fired bursts and shot off their mortar as we ran. But there were no incoming shells and in a second the Air Force CH-53 copters was off the ground, rising skyward with stomach-wrenching acceleration. Below spread Saigon, and then the Rung Sat, the "swamp of death" that lies between Saigon and the sea. For years the green, twisting area had been a communist stronghold and had been bombed heavily. As we flew over it, old bomb craters were still visible. It would be our last glimpse of Vietnam before we landed on a ship of the Seventh Fleet.

The mobile is not a graceful or elegant ship, not a sleek destroyer or a romantic ship, in Navy parlance, LKA 115. But it is well run, comfortable. The captain Cmdr.

J. Flynn of Newport, R.I., had a lean jaw, steel-blue eyes and a quiet confidence, and the Mobile was well prepared to do its unlikely job of picking up Vietnamese refugees.

We landed on the small helicopter flight deck at the stern 45 minutes after leaving Tan Son Nhut. The shotgun carrying marines and sailors who greeted us looked taken aback at the crowd of disheveled newsmen; they were expecting mutinous South Vietnamese soldiers.

Everyone who boarded the Mobile in the next three days, Americans or Vietnamese, went through the same rigorous screening process—two searches, a medical check-up and registration.

Navy and marine corpsmen gave free medical assistance to all Vietnamese who asked for it. Hundreds of children were treated for boils, fevers, sea

sickness. A few soldiers and civilians had lacerations from rocket wounds at Tan Son Nhut. Some elderly Vietnamese collapsed from nervous exhaustion. One woman fell into the hold of another ship and ruptured her spleen. A baby had 10 stitches in her forehead that had not been taken out in a month and had become infected.

The number of Vietnamese who sought medical care for themselves or their children was one more example of the unreasoning faith that many Vietnamese still have in America. Despite the hatred and contempt that some Vietnamese have displayed toward all foreigners, particularly in the days when there were 500,000 Americans in their country, many others have never lost an almost childlike faith in America's power to save them.

About 71,000 Vietnamese abandoned their homes, their possessions, and often their families, and put out to sea in tiny fishing boats or ungainly barges in hopes of finding the Seventh Fleet.

How they knew where we were is a mystery. The first day, Tuesday, we were only 17 miles off the coast near Vung Tau, at the mouth of the Saigon River. By Wednesday we had moved out to 40 miles and later. Because of the rumored sighting of a North Vietnamese gun-boat, to 70 miles.

But they came anyway. When we awoke on Wednesday morning there were 20 fishing boats off our starboard, all crammed with people, many of whom looked like poor fishermen. The Mobile had orders to take on people only by helicopter and we had to refuse them. Some United States sailors openly protested, asking their officers why we were leaving them.

A Vietnamese Roman Catholic priest in the bow of one wooden fishing craft bent to his knees and prayed to us to take him aboard. But we could not and the boats were pointed in the direction of the rest of the fleet where half a dozen merchant ships under charter to the military sealift command were embarking evacuees from boats.

Later a young boy jumped from a small scow and tried to swim to the Mobile. He was picked up in one of the Mobile's landing craft and taken to the Greenville Victory, a merchant ship.

When they had unloaded their refugees, some of the fishing boats turned toward shore. But most were either abandoned to float on the glassy green sea or set afire by their owners. It was a very final gesture, since for most of them boats had been their homes.

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The Vietnamese also came by their own helicopters. At 5:30 on Wednesday afternoon over 30 South Vietnamese Air Force helicopters appeared over the fleet in a swarm.

Before they could be organized by American officers aboard the ships, they began landing, setting down wherever they saw a flight deck. One dropped onto the deck of the destroyer Cook as an American voice exclaimed, "Holy God!" over the fleet's radio network.

Three landed on our ship, the Mobile, which looks like a gray freighter with large cargo booms and eight landing-craft stacked on its deck.

All three eventually had to be jettisoned because of lack of space. The first was flown off the deck by its South Vietnamese pilot, who jumped out just before it hit the water and exploded. The pilot was rescued, with three broken ribs.

After that, the two others were pushed over the stern. The \$500,000 Huey helicopters fell into the sea like some giant extinct fish and floated slowly away.

Lieut. Nguyen Tam Quan, the pilot of one of the helicopters, arrived with only his four crew members.

"I had to leave my wife, my baby, my mother and my

five brothers and sisters behind," he said. "We didn't have time to get them, he continued, standing on the deck. "The Communists were shelling Bien Hoa, my base, so we had to take off for Saigon. When I got there, some A-37's were bombing Tan Son Nhut and they hit many of our planes." [The planes responsible for the attack are believed to have been captured South Vietnamese aircraft piloted by Communists.]

Lieutenant Quan later flew to Can Tho in the Mekong Delta and, when Can Tho came under Communist shelling on Wednesday morning, to Cong Son Island off Vietnam's southern coast. "Everywhere we went we were attacked," he said. Finally we heard on our radios about the fleet and we set out from Cong Son together, about 60 choppers."

### 50 Helicopters Jettisoned

In the end 70 South Vietnamese helicopters made it to the fleet, though only 20 were kept, United States navy officers said. That would be a loss of at least \$25-million. Among the passengers aboard the South Vietnamese helicopters was Former Air Vice Marshal and Premier Nguyen Cao Ky.

Lieutenant Quan, who arrived with only the flight suit on his back, soon found a five-year old Vietnamese boy without a father or mother. The boy, who knew only his name, Ngoc An, had apparently been put aboard a United States evacuation helicopter at Tan Son Nhut.

The lieutenant, a slight, boyish looking man with a friendly smile, held the boy to his chest. Ngoc An, dressed in a red outfit with a military badge showing an eagle sewed to the front, clung back.

The next morning Lieutenant Quan washed the boy's clothes and hung them to dry on the deck. All the time the boy did not cry, or complain or shout for his mother.

"He is very quiet," the lieutenant said. "Do you know where we will go? If we get to the States, I have some American friends who were pilots. Perhaps I can find them and they can help me."

Few of the hundreds of children boarded the ships cried, and none of the Vietnamese knew where they

were going.

Chief Maurice Ring stayed up for 48 hours to cook for the Vietnamese. The burly 40-year-old sailor is in charge of the Mobile's main mess.

"We made chop suey and rice, noodles with chicken and vegetables, and soup for them," the chief said as his assistants washed out the huge pails that the food had been served in.

"None of us minds the work," Chief Ring said, fingering the white apron around his ample waist. "What makes us angry is when the United States stands by and does nothing to keep our word. After Vietnam, who is going to believe us any more. First Vietnam, then it will be Israel, then the United States itself."

Other sailors carried Vietnamese children around the deck on their shoulders while the children played with their beards, an unfamiliar object to the smooth-skinned Vietnamese. A few sailors struck up conversations with young Vietnamese girls.

Off the side of the ship, schools of porpoises and flying fish played.

A sailor's voice sounded over the ship's loudspeaker: "Now, sweepers man your brooms. Sweep down fore and aft. Sweep down all lower decks and passageways. Hold the garbage." We were too close to shore to dump garbage overboard.

Although as many as 117,000 Vietnamese are said to have been evacuated, both by the United States Air Force and Navy, it gradually became apparent that many Vietnamese who wanted to leave and who faced reprisals had been left behind.

Aboard the Mobile were two Americans, who had returned to Saigon on Sunday night aboard an Air Vietnam plane to look for the relatives of their Vietnamese born wives. One had served in Vietnam as a G.I. and the other was a former official of the Agency for International Development.

On Monday they bound their in-laws and on Tuesday morning, with Tan Son Nhut under attack, went to the United States consulate to try to get visas for them.

"A vice consular officer, his name was Per Orr, gave us the forms to fill out," one of the men recalled. "We got

there at 10 o'clock, and they were already dumping files into bags to burn them, and in the back another man was breaking up a machine with a hammer. We should have been suspicious, but no one told us they had already decided to evacuate."

Finally at 12, forms completed, the two men left the consulate and bring their in-laws to fill out further forms. On their way down the street they saw Americans going by in buses led by jeeps with sirens blaring.

"We got smart then and headed to Tan Son Nhut with our relatives, but when we got there, the police wouldn't let us in," one of the two men said. "So we had to leave our relatives and go in alone. I don't know what I'll tell my wife when I get back to Hawaii."

On Thursday afternoon 25 antique ships, the remains of the Vietnamese Navy, hove into view. The ships, looking more like the Monitor and the Merrimack, than a modern fleet included river patrol boats, World War II landing ships and three destroyer escorts. All of them had once belonged to the United States Navy.

Hundreds of Vietnamese amped the slow moving craft, some with their legs hanging over the side. One landing craft was in such bad repair that it belched thick reddish smoke as if it was on fire.

But after being replenished by the United States fleet with food and water—they did not need oil because they had brought their own oiler along—the Vietnamese ships set out during the night for Subic Bay in the Philippines and then Guam.

On Thursday afternoon a barge carrying 600 South Vietnamese paratroopers also appeared. The paratroopers, still in uniform and still armed with M-16's, apparently scared their officers as much as they did some of the American marines who were sent from the Mobile to disarm them. The marines kept a clear berth of them for the first night.

But a South Vietnamese officer, who identified himself over the radio as Captain Khanh, appealed repeatedly and with evident fear to be taken off the barge.

### No Room on the Ships

"I am relative of President Thieu, sir" Captain Khanh announced over the radio. "I trained in Okinawa, have a sister married to a G. I. in the United States, you must help me," he appealed to anyone listening.

An American, who identified himself by the call sign "India Mike," advised Captain Khanh to stay where he was since there was no room available on the merchant ships.

"But sir, you must get me aboard now, can you give me some orders," the South Vietnamese officer kept saying.

Finally, after 12 hours of Captain Khanh's pleading, the American on the other end lost his patience.

"Captain Khanh, I have orders not to talk to you for four hours," India Mike said.

Captain Khanh promptly replied, Okay, sir, I call you back in five hours."

Eventually, even Captain Khanh was taken aboard.

On Friday, after nearly four days aboard the Mobile, the 33 newsmen were transferred by helicopter to the Blue Ridge, the flag ship of the evacuation task force.

With evacuation over, Rear Adm. Donald B. Whitemire allowed the sailors aboard the Blue Ridge a barbecue cook-out on the flight deck. With an all-black rock band made up of sailors and marines playing popular soul music over large amplifiers, the hundred of sailors, embassy officials and newsmen consumed hamburgers, baked beans, macaroni salad, Coke and root beer. For desert there was chocolate cake.

Some sailors played baseball in their shorts.

On the ship's closed-circuit television the 1975 Academy Awards ceremony in Hollywood was being shown.

Few Vietnamese were aboard, except for Ambassador Martin's servants and a few employees of the consulate general in Can Tho. The thousands of other had been put aboard merchant ships or left on the Vietnamese Navy vessels.

Vietnam seemed far away, if you didn't stop to remember. In the evening, over the ship's loudspeaker, a nasal American voice read the evening prayer.

"Dear Father, you have safely brought us through another trying and frustrating week. Forgive us when we complain about our troubles."