

Deceit, Feuding in the Evacuation

By Fox Butterfield
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Although more than 100,000 Vietnamese have been successfully evacuated, the operation was marred by bad planning, bitter feuding among sections of the United States Mission in Saigon, and often an every-man-for-himself attitude.

As a result, many key Vietnamese officials and others who had long worked for the Americans were left behind, possibly to face severe reprisals from the Communists.

Moreover, the selection of those to be evacuated often seemed arbitrary.

Dozens of prostitutes, for example, were taken out by American contractors and officials who listed them as wives or fiancées. But the chief spokesman for the Saigon government and his staff, who as propaganda officials would be major Communist targets, were apparently not helped despite their repeated pleas.

In addition, some officials in the United States Embassy and consulate — partly because of panic and partly out of concern for their Vietnamese staff members — are known to have deceived each other or failed to notify subordinates about the final

evacuation April 29, actions that could have endangered many lives.

In the end, no American officials are known to have been left behind, and the loss of life in the actual evacuation was minimal.

But the confusion and haggling that accompanied the final American exit from Vietnam angered many American officials and left them bitter toward Ambassador Graham A. Martin.

It was, Martin, they say, who, by delaying evacuation until the last possible minute to avoid throwing Saigon into chaos, was responsible for the failure to get out many endangered Vietnamese.

Martin, an aloof, secretive man who strongly supported former President Nguyen Van Thieu, became ill with pneumonia in the last few days before the end and was finally ordered by Washington to begin the final evacuation.

These are some of the feelings and conclusions reached by diplomats and newsmen aboard ships of the Seventh Fleet, after they were flown out of Saigon last week.

According to knowledgeable diplomatic sources, when some U.S. officials began to push for evacuation planning after the loss of the northern two-thirds of the country in March, Martin's opposition delayed it.

As a consequence, some parts of the U.S. mission — which was composed of the embassy, the Agency for International Development, the U.S. Information Service, the Defense Attache Office and the Central Intelligence Agency — began privately to work out their own withdrawal schemes.

This worked best for those institutions — namely, the attache office and CIA — which had their own air transportation and money to bribe Vietnamese officials and guards.

There also appeared to be little coordination or careful planning to distinguish between cases of Vietnamese seriously endangered and

those who merely wanted to leave.

Thus, for instance, a Vietnamese who had worked ten years for the CIA in Pleiku before it was abandoned to the Communists discovered that no one in the embassy would help him after he had managed to flee to Saigon.

All his friends from the agency had already been transferred out of Vietnam and there was no one who recognized him.

By contrast, on Saturday, April 26, a U.S. Embassy car pulled up in front of Annie's Bar on Tu Do street in Saigon and took away three bar girls carrying their suitcases.

Perhaps the worst case of confusion involved the U.S. consulate general in Can Tho, the center of Military Region IV, in the Mekong Delta.

Officials from the consulate say they were not given notice to evacuate their Vietnamese personnel until 11:30 a.m. Tuesday the 29th, when they were suddenly ordered to withdraw only their remaining Americans.

By that time, the final emergency evacuation had already begun in Saigon.

As a result, the Can Tho office, acting on its own at the last minute, was able to get out only 42 of the 573 Vietnamese employees and 312 of more than 3000 Vietnamese dependents.

One Can Tho official who made three special trips to Saigon in the last week to discuss evacuation was reportedly turned away with the answer that Martin would not accept pulling out the Vietnamese employees.

Another Can Tho official who was dispatched to Saigon over the last weekend to

try to press for help in evacuating Vietnamese staff, was in the office of Donald Anderson, the embassy administrative officer in charge of pulling out field staff, on Tuesday morning, April 29, when the order for final evacuation was given.

"Anderson got up and left

his office with some of his own Vietnamese without telling our man anything," recalled a furious Can Tho official. "He just went out to get on an airplane with his people, leaving our man sitting there."

"It was every man for himself," related a Can Tho diplomat later. "The CIA just took care of its own people and did not care about us."

The Can Tho consulate general eventually escaped down the Bassac river to the South China Sea aboard two Navy landing craft that had been procured a week earlier.

But when officials of the consulate general got to the ocean, at 6 p.m. that Tuesday, they were unable to find a U.S. Navy ship the embassy had told them would be waiting.

The two landing craft finally met a U.S. merchant ship, and those aboard were then transferred by a variety of ships and helicopters to the Seventh Fleet two days later.