

NYTimes Saigon as it Fell and Just After—

The following diary was prepared by the Saigon bureau chief of The Associated Press and transmitted from Saigon yesterday via Paris. It records observations after April 30, the day the Communist forces took Saigon.

By **GEORGE ESPER**

The Associated Press

SAIGON, South Vietnam, May 8—We rode to Independence Palace hoping to see Lieut. Gen. Tran Van Tra, the chairman of the military administration committee for Saigon under the new Revolutionary Government.

The North Vietnamese guards were polite. They let me and Peter Arnett of The Associated Press through the outer gates with nothing more to show than our name cards.

We would never have got this far when President Nguyen Van Thieu reigned in the palace. It was a casual mood.

The guard at the gate leading to the grounds told us that General Tra was not there but there was another general who was coming out soon and we just might stop him on the spot to ask about getting credentials and restoring communications.

Shortly, the second general came out. We were asked to stand back 10 feet and let our interpreter talk to him. The general looked tough. He never looked at us.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I do not speak their language."

He walked to a waiting jeep.

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Weary and defeated, soldiers of the South Vietnamese Army were marching in groups through the city to

stack their weapons. They carried heavy backpacks.

Some paused to rest on cement benches in the park. They were beaten men.

A lieutenant colonel of the Saigon police passed by. We stopped to talk for a minute and he showed me his police identification badge. I did not note his name. I glanced into his eyes. They were sad. "It is finished," he told me in broken English.

He walked 10 feet away to a war memorial to South Vietnamese marines in the park facing the National Assembly. He did a sharp about face, saluted the statue then raised his pistol and fired into his head, falling spread-eagle on his back.

I tried to shout: "Wait!" The words caught in my throat. I was too late. He died minutes later at a hospital. It will haunt me that he was not more than 10 feet away from me.

Five days later, North Vietnamese and Revolutionary Government troops destroyed the war memorial, chopping away at it viciously with sledgehammers in full view of hundreds of people. It was part of a Communist campaign to remove American and Thieu Government vestiges after the North Vietnamese troops and tanks rolled in.

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The soldiers of the South Vietnamese Army faded away. Whole uniforms and shoes were scattered about on streets as they threw off their clothes in a panic to dissociate themselves from the former Saigon force.

One city block was so littered with uniforms that it appeared that an entire former South Vietnamese bat-

talion of hundreds of troops had ripped away their clothing in disgrace.

There were some points of resistance that first day.

The clatter of automatic weapons fire could be heard clearly just below the fourth floor Associated Press office in the Eden Building between the National Assembly and city hall.

The North Vietnamese took up positions in a second park facing city hall. The fire seemed to be coming from that direction.

The North Vietnamese huddled against the walls of the shuttered Rex Theater, the red, blue and yellow-starred Revolutionary Government flag hanging from above the marquee that advertised the last film, "Lady Tramp."

I couldn't help but remember that the Rex Building once was the headquarters of the joint United States Public Affairs Office—JUSPAO—the American propaganda arm that staged the "Five o'Clock Follies," the military briefings that told of victories and body counts.

The official line from the United States Government in the waning days was that there would be a bloodbath. I saw no bloodbath.

I watched Vietnamese children curiously gather around North Vietnamese soldiers to see their weapons while the latter shyly looked away.

I saw children playing aboard abandoned tanks of the former South Vietnamese Army just as if they were toy weapons.

The countryside also was quiet. Associated Press correspondent, Matt Franjola, reported from My Tho, 35 miles

-A Newsmen's Diary

south of Saigon, that throughout the lush Mekong delta commerce was booming and that destroyed homes were being rebuilt. A program also was under way in Saigon to clear the streets of debris and litter and to smash American and Thieu Government vestiges.

Saigon Bank remained closed. It was confiscated along with all American properties by the new regime.

An army captain told me that after an initial heavy attack on a division headquarters near Saigon the North Vietnamese began firing only behind and in front of the fleeing soldiers and civilians to stop them.

"If they tried to kill, they could have killed everybody" he said.

The captain later surrendered. He was held for two days, given a pass to see his family and was told he could leave.

After 15 days, he must report to Communist authorities again. He thinks it will be for indoctrination. He says he has no fears of reprisals.

"They told us, 'Don't worry, there will be no killing,' " the captain said. He said that officers holding the rank of major and higher were immediately sent to indoctrination camps for three months.

Associated Press staff members moved freely around Saigon, including along the road beside Tan Son Nhut Air Base where burned-out North Vietnamese tanks lay in the street, indicating that South Vietnamese Army units had put up some resistance there.

I drove with Peter Arnett to the Tan Son Nhut gate

that leads to the United States defense attache's compound—where thousands of Vietnamese had tried to crash their way through for a free ride to America.

It was quiet now, with only a few guards and no more mobs. The North Vietnamese military police let us through with ease when we flashed the temporary press credentials stamped by the Provisional Government authorities in the National Assembly building.

At Tan Son Nhut the civilian terminal was a shambles from a heavy rocket attack.

Two nights before the surrender, debris littered the terminals.

I took some hurried photos of the United States defense attache compound that had been crumpled in ruins, apparently destroyed by the Americans themselves with explosive charges.

On the morning after the surrender, some markets were open. There was plenty of traffic, a shortage of gasoline and a run on bicycles.

Peddlers were doing a bustling business in Revolutionary Government flags made of paper, cloth and plastic. The flags appeared everywhere, on buildings, trucks, cars, jeeps and even on the homes of Western correspondents who had been evacuated with United States Embassy personnel.

The Embassy itself and Ambassador Graham A. Martin's residence were sealed off after total looting by the South Vietnamese.

Mr. Martin's personal chair in his villa was claimed as a souvenir by North Vietnamese soldiers.