

WXP Post How War's End Came To Saigon

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The writer, a special correspondent for The Washington Post in Southeast Asia, is a Briton who stayed behind when Saigon was evacuated.

By James Fenton

Special to The Washington Post

SAIGON, May 7 (Delayed in transmission)—When the surrender was announced over the radio at 10:15 a.m. on April 30, I was standing on the roof of the Caravelle Hotel, watching the battle lines coming closer to the city, the flash of exploding shells and the curtain of thick smoke in the direction of the airport. It was strange in broad daylight to see a white flare shoot up over Saigon and hang above the rooftops like some brilliant planet. Then we realized that the white flare was for peace.

On the floor below, in the restaurant, the waiters were grouped around the radio. I asked one of them what was happening. "The war is over," he said.

On the Continental Hotel, opposite, the French flag was being hoisted by one of the staff while on the steps below, a group of

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of the soldiers beckoned me on board. They shouted for me to keep my head down, and we accelerated forward and rammed the palace gate. I nearly fell off the back of the tank. We were the second vehicle into the grounds. Already the palace guards were lined up on the lawn, their hands above their heads and guarded by the NLF.

As each following tank came onto the lawn, it fired a salute. I noticed an extraordinary number of dragonflies in the air. The tanks arranged themselves in an arc in front of the palace. On ours, there was an open carton of Winston cigarettes.

On the terrace of the palace, an NLF soldier ran waving a flag, but the old yellow-and-red banner of the republic was still flying from the main flagpole.

If film of the next scenes is released, it will appear to have been stage-managed. Events in history are not actually supposed to look historic. Yet the NLF, on the day that they took Saigon, had a genius for imposing the heroic style onto events which were themselves remarkable enough. They looked and acted like their own propaganda.

A large banner, with the blue-and-red background and the yellow star of the Front, was fixed onto a pole, and then the standard-bearer rushed forward into the palace, waving the flag around and around above his head. As he did so, all the tanks fired into the air, and saluted the moment of victory for a deafening few minutes.

I am told that the standard-bearer ran up the first flights of stairs and then took the elevator, which would explain why he appeared on the roof in a rather short time. The guns went wild. The flares shot into the air, and the surrendered soldiers waved their hands above their heads in apparent terror.

I shook hands with the tank crew, jumped off and greeted the other arriving troops. By now, there were

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dejected South Vietnamese soldiers were sitting still fully armed. We drove out towards the Newport Bridge, passing the retreating troops. I was with the BBC team, whose presence provoked reactions of increasing hostility. Soldiers of the newly surrendered government passed us in trucks and on every available means of transport. Some of them were driving around on earth-moving equipment, sitting on the shovel.

There were still some government tanks in place. One of the crewmen was fingering a grenade. The streets were lined with anxious civilians waiting for the arrival of the victors.

The soldiers were still armed, and it was frightening to see how they reacted to the BBC, which they regarded as an agency in the pay of the Vietcong.

By the Newport Bridge, we were stopped by the governor of Giadinh Province, a stout and sour man loaded down with weapons and grenades. He appeared to be intending to make his last stand.

First I thought he was going to kill us for being BBC, then he made us take the Union Jack and press sign off the car, which he ordered parked between two tank traps. Later in the day, it had been flattened.

As we walked back toward the city, the trucks we had passed earlier reappeared, and rifles were fired. There was panic among the soldiers. Our interpreter was frightened. So was I.

Later, walking out of the Reuter office, I saw a tank bearing the flag of the victorious National Liberation Front coming into the square in front of the presidential palace.

I ran after it and caught up just as it was turning toward the palace gates. I made every kind of salute and gesture I could think of to get it to stop. It slowed down and a soldier got off, carrying a gun with which he threatened to hit me.

I took a step backward and extended my hand. One

trucks of soldiers and artillery pieces filling up what used to be called John F. Kennedy Square, together with more tanks.

Most were still camouflaged with slightly withered branches. As they took up position under the tall trees, I noticed how well they blended with the green background—their uniforms a rather warm shade of green. These were regular soldiers of the NLF. The first into the palace were the 312th Division, who were also, I am told, the first into Dienbienphu, the French stronghold whose fall signaled the end of France's Indochina war.

There was a great influx of green into the capital. All that stood out were the red armbands of the soldiers, the red tags on their guns and the red badges on their helmets.

Things had happened with incredible speed and continued to do so. It was only 4½ hours between the departure of the last U.S. helicopter from the embassy roof and the victorious entry into the palace. Within minutes after that, Saigon's population came out to have a look at the NLF. Traffic started up again to a certain extent, and everybody went to look at the palace.

On many public buildings, the old flag was still flying. I watched one of the arriving troops, uncertain of his way around town, pull out compass and take a reading. Some local people asked him where he wanted to go.

In the race to the palace,

one of the tanks had gotten lost and was wandering hopelessly around the market area.

All along Tu Do Street there were little heaps of military gear, as if every government soldier had suddenly melted into his boots. Some appeared to have stripped down completely in the middle of the road. I have never seen so many khaki socks. There were piles of weapons in doorways, helmets and flak jackets strewn all around.

Occasionally, one would see surrendered troops under custody. In the twinkling of an eye, one of the largest armies of the world had disappeared into history. Along the streets of Saigon, a large number of men were dressed only in boxer shorts, affecting an air of studied indifference.

"Don't look at me," they seemed to say. "I always walk around like this it's the weather."

Little by little, the NLF began to take control of the major public buildings. I watched the Ministry of Defense surrender and several other simple ceremonies. The city hall, a French colonial structure designed to resemble a Loire chateau, proved a hard nut to crack. Nobody seemed able to find the key.

After an NLF soldier had tried to shoot the flag off the pole, a government soldier who was sitting on the pavement in his shorts came up and took the NFL flag and proceeded in this bare feet to climb up the baroque

facade and fix the flag himself, lowering the one for which he had fought.

The city filled up with truck loads of waving NLF soldiers. The fire brigade staged a spontaneous demonstration and came along Tu Do Street at full tilt, headlights blazing, waving and shouting wildly with their brilliant steel helmets and expressions of uncontrollable delight.

Commandeered police jeeps were driven through the streets, which were full of shouting children. A large number of rather unconvincing young men with armbands and long hair began to appear, carrying M-16 rifles. Some of these were abruptly disarmed.

Those who were thoroughly chagrined at what had happened were staying indoors. I went to my old hotel in the market area, and got the manageress to give me lunch bread, walnuts, olives, cheese and beer.

"We are very pleased to welcome the liberation forces," she said through clenched teeth. For the first time in our acquaintance, she gave me a meal for free. A former nightclub dancer whose evacuation I had failed to arrange was looking somewhat sick. She had tied her luxuriant hair into a chaste bun and donned black pajamas for the occasion.

But for the most part, particularly among the young and the old, there was a tremendous curiosity about the NLF soldiers and apparent

friendliness toward them. It is difficult to convey the emotions and scenes of that day. As Peter Arnett of The Associated Press remarked to Alan Dawson of United Press International, "I'm glad you stayed on. Otherwise, we would have become known as the pro-Communist agency."

The National Liberation Front was confounding its critics and astonishing its admirers by the efficiency, ease, and pleasantness with which the takeover was conducted.

The streets were soon full of little groups squatting on the pavement, chatting with NLF soldiers and asking them what was going to happen next. Would there be revenge? Would those who had fled from the North in 1954 be forced to go back?

Would they be in trouble? Answers to all these questions were no.

Meanwhile, after a brief firefight not far from the U.S. embassy, looting continued there. The students had organized groups to help the NLF's Provisional Revolutionary Government bring life back to normal, and some of these were armed. I drove with two such youths past the Chinese Nationalist Malaysian embassies, both of which were being looted. The students got out of the truck on both occasions, fired a few shots into the air and dispersed the crowd.

There were occasional sounds of fighting in the distance, and unexplained explosions, but the war seemed more or less over.

The Mekong Delta town of Mytho was occupied at 6 that day and was probably among the last things to go, although I have heard that there are still a few minor pockets of resistance.

It appeared from the smoke that Tansonnhut air field had been the scene of the heaviest fighting. The U.S. Defense Attache's Office compound was still smoldering slightly a few days later. The large metal building looked like a cardboard box that had been sat on by a giant. It was utterly crumpled.

On May Day, I walked out at dawn and witnessed NFL wash hanging from the window sills. The soldiers were making breakfast by their parked tanks. They had slept on the pavements, or wherever space was available. There were still trouserless former government troops wandering around, and a few beggars sleeping in the doorways. I noticed one old woman lying asleep while a small girl beside her was looking at the pictures in a pornographic book.

There was litter everywhere: military litter, domestic litter and incriminating items that people had thrown away—documents, letters, and in one unfathomable case, a large pile of 78 rpm phonograph records.

Although people had been expecting a May Day parade, it was clear that the new authorities had not had nearly enough time to organize such a thing. Mad-

ame NGO Ba Thanh and her Buddhist nuns put on a small demonstration. But it seemed to attract little attention.

The NLF were organizing sightseeing tours for their troops, who drove round in trucks gazing at the buildings. Around the major hotels, the beggars and prostitutes had still not reemerged. In the afternoon, however, I saw one cripple who had formerly dressed himself up as a government soldier returning to his usual beat, dressed in what he clearly conceived to be the manner of the liberation forces.

Even by May Day, people arrived in Saigon from Danang and Hue, and there has since been much movement in and out of Saigon.

It appears that the pattern of NLF behavior has been similar throughout the country.

Although there is talk of changes and decrees against such things as prostitution, the subsequent days have seen something of a return toward normal in Saigon life. The thieves are still operating. One NLF soldier had two cameras stolen from him in the street, with classic "Saigon cowboy" tactics.

Nearly every member of the press corps seems to have lost something. On the streets, there are stalls full of obviously looted items. There are thousands of dollars worth of photographic equipment to be had for a song. There is good wine, re-

pulsive American cheese, liquor, office typewriters.

Among all this, soldiers move around with seeming indifference. It is clear that they have received orders to do nothing to antagonize the population. They are not yet arresting prostitutes, stopping the beggars or taking any active role in the life of the city. But they do not like what they see.

Most of the NLF soldiers I have spoken to in Saigon, as opposed to those in the Delta, come from Hanoi and the North. They compare Saigon unfavorably with Hanoi, but they say they will make it a beautiful place. One man said that when the new government got going, Saigon and Hanoi would be more beautiful than Paris.

They have already gone a long way toward improving the place by destroying a military memorial opposite the Assembly. It was of two advancing combat soldiers and was known as the "the buggery monument" because of their unfortunate positioning.

One gets the impression that Saigon, now that people are used to the NLF troops, is hoping to draw them into its own corruption. The prostitutes try unsuccessfully to solicit the soldiers, and the beggars ask them for money.

In Givral's, the fashionable cafe, I saw a child bringing around a begging mug, an NLF soldier almost gave her a bit of his ice-cream. His comrades said something and the soldier withdrew his spoon.