

Among the Last G.I.'s, Joy, Anger and Disbelief

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By JOSEPH B. TREASTER

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, Jan. 24—The last American soldiers in South Vietnam received the news today that the war was finally ending for them with emotions that ranged from elation and relief to disappointment, anger and resentment.

For some who had grown fond of the special life-style here there was a sense of loss. And there were some young men who had lived with the war more than half their lives, who had been crushed when their hopes for peace were shattered late last year and simply refused to believe when they heard President Nixon announce the agreement to stop shooting at 8 A.M. Sunday, Saigon time.

"I just ain't going to believe it till Sunday and I see we don't go out anymore," said Specialist 4 John Victor Bilton, a 19-year-old radio operator from Miami, as he returned to the Bien Hoa air base this afternoon from an operation with a platoon of South Vietnamese rangers.

Not Like World War II

There were some parties this evening but, for the most part, they were rather subdued. "This is not like the end of World War II, said Capt. Herbert Carter, a 29-year-old helicopter pilot from Harrisonville, Mo. "We didn't win a war. There's nothing clearcut. Nobody surrendered. I think most people feel like I do: No matter what they set up here, it's going to slip back to the way it was in '61 and '62 and I don't think any of us expect the North Vietnamese to keep up their part of the bargain."

Not all of the servicemen interviewed today agreed with Captain Carter. In fact, if anything was clear, it was that there was no more consensus on the war among the men closest to it than there has been found in the United States.

Some lamented the loss of 46,000 American dead, and one or two mentioned the bloody battle for Hamburger Hill, without being quite sure where the hill was or what it is called now.

Professional Soldier's View

A professional soldier's answers followed national policy. Lieut. Col. Robley W. Davis was standing in the hallway of a huge air-conditioned office building at Tan Son Nhut air base. Colonel Davis, who is 41 and in his second tour in Vietnam, said: "We've finally arrived at the point where the President said we were going to arrive and on the terms he said we would do it."

As he spoke, commanders of helicopter units throughout South Vietnam crowded into the corridor. They were about to be briefed by a brigadier general on how they were to execute the final plans for departure.

The helicopter commanders, as well as other commanders across the country, must work out the exact sequence of departure for the 23,700 remaining American servicemen, Colonel Davis said.

Colonel Davis said that a great deal of attention would be given to details in the final days of the American presence in Vietnam. "We don't want to blow a good job by a sloppy packing-up job," he said.

Outside, half a dozen helicopter gunners, all 20 or 21 years old, gathered around the

kind of light observation helicopter that they "ride shotgun" in.

"I didn't exactly cry," said Specialist 4 Terry Goodge of Antonito, Colo. "I just don't want to go home. I've got a year and a half left in the Army and I don't want to spend it in the States."

"I've got a decent job here," Specialist Goodge continued, "and you can have a good time here. The money's good; I get flight pay and combat pay."

A major who commands a support unit of about 500 men in Saigon said he thought that 90 per cent of his soldiers were sorry they had to go home.

"I really hate to leave myself," said the officer, who is on his third tour. "We have good working conditions. We have a set mission to do and we feel like we have a purpose in life, so everyone's fairly happy."

A pilot listing the advantages of life in Saigon, began, "Cheap women, cheap booze, cheap food—where else can you get a big ole' red lobster for \$2?" An Air Force mechanic added: "An enlisted man doesn't have to pay taxes and we get free stamps, too. You just write on the envelope 'Free' and away it goes."

One General Very Mad

Sgt. Ronald Heiselman of Rockland, Me., another of the gunners, said on his first tour here he initially felt it had been a good idea for Americans to help in Vietnam. "But you'd try to help these people and they'd just steal from you and try to get money out of you any way they could," he said. When he heard the news today, Sergeant Heiselman said he was "kind of mad." "I've got so recently that I want to out there and get rid of them all."

"They're no different," Sergeant Heiselman continued in a smoldering fury. "I hate the Vietnamese on both sides. But I've still got to give credit to the North Vietnamese Army. At least they're fighting."

Chief Warrant Officer 2 John Schiffereff of Seattle, who is known as Onion, and Chief Warrant Officer 2 Robert Woutes Monette, who are both in their second tours and fly as a team in a Cobra helicopter gunship, said they were waiting for the weather to clear over ar Zone C northwest of Saigon so they could go out on a patrol when they heard the news.

"I looked at Onion and he looked at me, Mr Monette said, "and I had goose pimples and he had goose pimples."

Mr. Monette said the American infantry advisers at Tay Ninh brought a couple of bottles of cold duck and some paper cups out to the helicopters parked on a little airstrip near their headquarters, and everybody drank a toast to the end of the war. Nobody seemed to talk much.

"I'm glad it's over. It hurt," said Mr. Schillereff, who was critically wounded when his helicopter was shot down on his first tour.

There were half a dozen American infantrymen with the South Vietnamese ranger platoon when it returned to Bien Hoa this afternoon. Most of them seemed to agree that the United States had done the right thing in sending troops to South Vietnam; some of them said this was the wrong time to quit.