THE THIRD INDOCHINA WAR
1973-1975

A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE
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TITLE
THE THIRD INDOCHINA WAR
1973 - 1975
A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

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Submitted to the faculty
MAY 1980

In partial fulfillment of requirements for graduation

AIR COMMAND AND STAFF COLLEGE
AIR UNIVERSITY (ATC)
MAXWELL AFB, ALABAMA 36112
This report is a book-length manuscript that recounts the author's experiences as a member of the Defense Attache Office, Saigon, from 1973 to 1975, to include the evacuation of Saigon in April, 1975. The volume also contains an account of the author's travels to Hanoi as a member of the US Delegation, Four Party Joint Military Team.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Forward .......................................................... 1
Preface ............................................................ iii
Chapter I  - Peace Was At Hand ................................. 1
Chapter II - Saigon 1973: "Long Time, No See, Dai Uyl" .... 11
Chapter III - Peace Was Not At Hand .......................... 28
Chapter IV - No Gas Today ...................................... 40
Chapter V  - Armageddon or Mini-Armageddon ............... 54
Chapter VI - MIAs -- Only Hanoi Knows ....................... 71
Chapter VII - The Big Lie ...................................... 88
Chapter VIII - Hanoi ........................................... 109
Chapter IX  - Nine Streams .................................... 137
Chapter X  - The Year of the Tiger ............................ 153
Chapter XI - "When The Time Is Ripe, They Will Strike." .... 178
Chapter XII - "Hogwash!" ...................................... 195
Chapter XIII - "To Restore The Moon To Its Full Glory" .... 213
Chapter XIV - "Cry, LaFayette!" ............................... 232
Chapter XV - "Desperate Mice Bite Cats" ..................... 256
Chapter XVI - "...To The Last Bullet And The Last Grain Of Rice" ............................ 272
Chapter XVII - "You Must Win: Otherwise Do Not Return" .. 285
Chapter XVIII - Our Guardian Angel ............................ 306

Chapter XIX - "A Presidential Order" .......................... 320
Chapter XX - "The Rice Of The US Navy" ....................... 343
Chapter XXI - Who Lost Vietnam? .............................. 350
Footnotes .......................................................... 367
History mirrors what we do. If history reflects a South Vietnamese defeat, it also reflects our own. No tortured rationalization can change it. Their commitment is ours. For we underwrote it. If we fail them, we fail ourselves.

-- Major General John E. Murray
Defense Attache, Saigon
1973-1974

Americans came like firemen to extinguish the fire, but they haven't done the job, and now they are going home. Fine, we will put out the fire ourselves, but you have taken the water, the pump, and the ladder with you.

-- An unidentified South Vietnamese Civil Engineer, 1973

Policies beget human events. All too frequently, the events set in motion by our Government's policy decisions are not understood by the American people - or by the government itself. No one is more aware of this phenomenon than the people who serve as implementers of these policies. Certainly one of the major advantages of career military service is the unique opportunity to participate as an actor in events that other Americans can only follow vicariously through the
imperfect eyes and ears of the media. The military profession is replete with opportunities to "go where the action is" and become involved in the challenge and excitement of history in the making. But, like the athlete who copes with the harsh reality that victory will not always crown his efforts, the military man must be prepared to accept his own moments of heartbreak along with the moments of glory. The unconditional surrender of South Vietnam was such a moment for me, as it was for countless thousands of other Americans who gave of themselves for what they regarded as a good cause.

PREFACE

In an earlier work, And the Asian Smiles, I recounted my experiences as an intelligence advisor to the South Vietnamese territorial forces during 1971 and 1972. This book is the sequel to that story. It is a highly personalized account of life in Saigon during South Vietnam's so-called "decent interval" from 1973 to 1975. The story is not pleasant, ending as it does when a North Vietnamese tank crashed through the wrought-iron gates of Independence Palace and Saigon became officially known as "Ho Chi Minh City." I have written both volumes in the hope that sharing my observations and experiences will contribute to an understanding of why our efforts in Vietnam ended with Ambassador Graham Martin's ignominious departure from Saigon in an evacuation helicopter. In the first book, I described the difficulties we encountered in attempting to comprehend our Communist adversary. This volume addresses another (and perhaps more serious) problem -- the overall failure of Americans to understand our South Vietnamese ally.

I am indebted to J. C. Smith for his indefatigable ef-
forts to impart discipline to my prose and for his valuable
suggestions on the structure of the work. Major General
Edward G. Lansdale (Ret) read my initial work, and his timely
letters of encouragement kept me at the typewriter for the
long hours required to complete this endeavor. Brigadier
General James L. Collins and his staff at the US Army Center
for Military History assisted immeasurably in providing access
to several key unpublished works. Colonel Harry G. Summers, Jr.,
of the US Army War College and Colonel Thomas Fabyancic of the
Air War College read the manuscript and offered advice for
which I am grateful. In addition, both Major General John E.
Murray (Ret) and Major General Homer D. Smith (Ret) patiently
reviewed a ponderous draft of the manuscript and provided in-
valuable feedback on both style and content.

Finally, I should make it clear that the generous consent
of these officers to review my work in no way implies their
endorsement of its contents.

Montgomery, Alabama

Stuart A. Herrington
Major, United States Army
11 April 1980
I. PEACE WAS AT HAND

I still recall the strange sensations that swept over me when I returned to the States after my first tour in Vietnam. Nothing seemed real as I rode along a San Francisco freeway in a plush, air-conditioned bus. To one accustomed to the sights and smells of crowded Oriental cities, San Francisco seemed abnormally clean and orderly. I was struck by the downtown streets that appeared almost empty -- the same streets that had seemed so alive and busy during my last visit. Yet I knew that nothing had really changed -- it just seemed different. San Francisco was such a change from the dust of rural Vietnam and the chaotic clamor of Saigon traffic that I was experiencing reentry problems.

As the bus whisked me from Travis Air Force Base to the San Francisco airport, I could hardly believe that it was August 1972 and that I had just completed almost two years of duty as an advisor in Vietnam.* Staring out the window at the

California real estate, I marveled at how completely the world could change in the space of a brief plane ride. In Saigon, even the privileged Americans lived a circumscribed existence. Their lives were montages of rationed gas, liquor and tobacco; frozen meats and reconstituted milk; a single post exchange with limited stocks, and the ever-present midnight curfew.

Yet Saigon’s hardships were luxuries compared with the conditions that confronted American advisors in the rural countryside. We had lived a relatively spartan existence, though not by Vietnamese standards. During that bus ride through suburban San Francisco, it occurred to me that most of our American poor lived better and enjoyed more creature comforts than all but the wealthiest Vietnamese. Conditioned as I had become to some of the uglier realities of life in wartime Vietnam, the images of abundance and prosperity that flashed past as my bus neared the airport caused me to reflect on how much Americans take for granted. Southeast Asia had done wonders for my sense of perspective. It was good to be home.

I had just completed a tour as an intelligence advisor to the militia forces that were struggling against a deeply entrenched Communist insurgency in South Vietnam’s Hau Nghia province. Hau Nghia lay on the Cambodian border, directly astride a traditional invasion corridor to Saigon and perilously near a major enemy base area in the infamous “Parrot’s Beak.” I had arrived in Vietnam in January 1971, fresh from Vietnamese language school and anxious to tackle the formidable task of neutralizing the Vietcong “shadow government.” My tour had exposed me to the subtleties of guerrilla warfare during 1971 and the realities of full-scale conventional combat during the 1972 North Vietnamese Easter Offensive. By the time I left Hau Nghia in August 1972, the North Vietnamese offensive had stalled and the last American combat unit had departed Vietnam. Only 40,000 advisors and technicians remained in the country, men who were serving as unwitting bargaining tools in the Paris peace talks then in progress between Dr. Kissinger and North Vietnam’s Le Duc Tho.

Readjusting to the comforts of American life was easy, but terminating my involvement with the Vietnamese cause proved more difficult. I struggled to keep abreast of developments in Paris and Vietnam and combed the newspapers for references to Hau Nghia province. To my chagrin, the war had apparently ceased to be newsworthy. Coverage of the continuing struggle between General Giap’s units and the South Vietnamese was sparse, although the media was reporting extensively on the Nixon-McGovern
presidential campaign. Senator McGovern accused the President of dragging his feet in the search for peace and claimed that the administration was more interested in the survival of the Thieu government than in the fate of American prisoners of war. Fresh from a controversial trip to Hanoi, former Attorney General Ramsey Clark echoed Hanoi's accusation that American bombing was killing innocent civilians. Clark was telling anyone who would listen that a victory by McGovern would stimulate Hanoi to release its American POWs.

As one who had just emerged from almost two years of total involvement with the South Vietnamese cause, I was dismayed at both the paucity of news from Vietnam and the one-sided descriptions of the war by the President's opponents. I found it difficult to accept the lack of American concern for what had been the basis of my existence for so long. The Vietnam War seemed suddenly reduced to a single issue -- get the POWs home. I bristled at the Ramsey Clarks who could deplore the actions of the US Air Force and still conveniently ignore Hanoi's destructive attacks against South Vietnam's populated areas in 1968 and 1972 -- attacks that had been deliberately aimed at uprooting the civilian population. American disenchantment with the war in Vietnam seemed greater than the disenchantment of the Vietnamese themselves. Outside of the military, I found few Americans who felt that the United States owed anything to the South Vietnamese people. The war had simply gone on too long and had engendered too much bitterness and misunderstanding. I soon learned to avoid discussions of Vietnam with everyone but close acquaintances. The prevailing ignorance of what was transpiring in Vietnam was almost impenetrable, and attempts to explain the realities of the war were usually doomed to failure. "Vietnam" had become an ugly word.

I signed in at Ft. Huachuca, Arizona in the Arizona mountains in late August 1972 and remained as a student in the US Army Intelligence Center and School until June 1973. My class consisted of sixty officers, brought together to study the nuances of intelligence collection and dissemination to prepare us for higher level assignments. During that year, I found time to serve as an escort officer for a group of Vietnamese intelligence officers who were enrolled in the foreign officers' course. Like me, these officers were struggling to keep up with the decisive events that were unfolding in Paris and Saigon as 1972 drew to a close. Washington and Hanoi seemed to be on the threshold of a cease-fire agreement when the talks stalled, and President Nixon confounded the North Vietnamese by ordering B-52 raids against Hanoi and Haiphong (to the unconcealed delight
of my South Vietnamese friends). North Vietnam, still recovering from the sacrifices of the Easter Offensive, was again learning the hard way that President Nixon was willing to strike where his predecessors had feared to tread.

By January 1973, Hanoi's leaders returned to the conference table. In Arizona, my Vietnamese friends and I anxiously awaited the publication of the terms of the long-delayed agreement. We knew that South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu had stubbornly opposed the settlement. The American media had given ample coverage to the determined efforts of President Nixon's envoys to convince the independent Thieu to sign the agreement. When the details of the agreement finally surfaced, I could see why Saigon had balked and why Hanoi could easily regard it as a diplomatic victory. In exchange for the repatriation of all American prisoners, the United States had agreed to a total military withdrawal within sixty days of a cease-fire. Despite the strenuous objections of President Thieu, the agreement tacitly permitted the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) to remain in South Vietnam. These terms caused one Vietnamese officer at Ft. Huachuca to state bluntly, "Dai Uy (Captain), your country has just sacrificed a loyal ally. This treaty is the end of South Vietnam." Not all of the Vietnamese at Ft. Huachuca felt this strongly, but they were unanimous in their belief that the Paris Agreement was deeply flawed because it did not require Hanoi to withdraw its forces to North Vietnam. "Your President," one Vietnamese told me, "has forced South Vietnam to sign the Paris Agreement because he promised peace to the American people. America will soon have her soldiers and prisoners at home, but there will be no peace for South Vietnam as long as the North Vietnamese Army occupies our land."

I tried unsuccessfully to allay their fears by pointing out that President Nixon had reaffirmed America's continuing support for South Vietnam. The President had consistently demonstrated his readiness to employ American military power and our Air Force in nearby Thailand and the Seventh Fleet on the South China Sea were ready to react if the North Vietnamese failed to respect the terms of the agreement. I also pointed out that, under "Operation Enhance," the United States had transshipped large quantities of planes, tanks and other weapons systems to Saigon before the signing of the agreement.*

* The best account of the pressures that Washington exerted on President Thieu to obtain his support of the Paris Agreement appears in Dr. Kissinger's, "The White House Years." Thieu agreed to sign only when faced with the prospect of a total cutoff of American aid. South Vietnam signed, but the population knew that Thieu had done so under duress, and that he regarded the terms of the treaty to be dangerously one-sided.
Privately, I shared the fears of my Vietnamese companions. From what I had seen of American attitudes toward Vietnam, I was not at all confident that President Nixon could ever intervene militarily anywhere in Southeast Asia once the United States had closed the door on this frustrating chapter of our military history. Still, the President was not one to shrink from difficult and unpopular decisions, and, of course, he had just been reelected for a term that would extend until 1976. I suggested to my anxious Vietnamese colleagues at Ft. Huachuca that they should simply put their trust in the President's commitment and in the reassuring proximity of the American air power to their country. I reminded them that their army had matured considerably on the battlefield in 1972 and that South Vietnam possessed its own rapidly expanding air force. Furthermore, the North Vietnamese Army had been badly hurt in its invasion of the south in 1972 and would require considerable time to rebuild, especially if Hanoi showed any measure of compliance with the terms of the new agreement. After all, according to the sketchy reports we were receiving, the cease-fire accords prohibited the introduction of new forces into South Vietnam.

My game defense of the Paris Agreement wasn't too convincing. During a discussion of the impact of the Kissinger solution on the war, one Vietnamese officer felt compelled to remind me of the history of the Vietnam conflict:

Dai Uy, you know enough about the motivation and tactics of the Communists to know that they will use this agreement precisely as they used their own self-declared cease-fire in 1968 to mask preparations for the Tet Offensive. This agreement gives them a rest when they need it the most, and it puts an end to American involvement. Now the Communists can say that they tried the path of peace when they launch their next offensive. We understand why President Nixon desired an agreement. We just don't understand why he was in such a hurry. Now we must deal with 13 North Vietnamese divisions that are occupying our territory, and they are backed by the Chinese and the Russians. It will be difficult for us to handle them alone, but we can do it. In truth, though, our forces need at least two more years before we can call Vietnamization a success.

By the time I graduated from Ft. Huachuca, I convinced my assignments officer in Washington that I should return to Southeast Asia. After an Embassy job in Laos fell through because our Vientiane operation was closing out, I found myself on orders to the Defense Attache Office in Saigon. I was scheduled to arrive in Vietnam almost exactly one year from the day I had departed. At that time, heavy fighting was still exacting a debilitating toll in lives and property as the two sides jockeyed for territorial advantages in anticipation of the cease-fire. I reassured my worried parents that this assignment would be different. After all, what could possibly happen to me in
cease-fire Saigon? This tour would be safe and cushy compared to my experiences as an advisor in Hau Nghia province. I had no way of knowing that I would soon be forced to reappraise this optimistic view of life in Saigon, courtesy of the North Vietnamese Army.

II. SAIGON 1973: "LONG TIME NO SEE, DAI UY!"

I returned to Vietnam on a Bangkok-bound MAC charter flight that briefly touched down at Saigon's Tan Son Nhut Air Base to allow a lone Vietnamese Air Force officer and me to disembark. It was quite a change from the tension-filled experience I had shared with 200 GIs when we arrived at the same terminal during the war. My new boss, Major Bob Lilley, expedited my passage through Vietnamese customs and immigration and then dropped me at my new home, the Vo Tanh Billets. The major explained apologetically that, as one of only two captains in Saigon, I was too junior for assignment to the "Command Trailer Park." It turned out that Vo Tanh Billets was the former BOQ #1, the home of the ranking colonels who worked in MACV Headquarters during the war. My air-conditioned room was comfortably furnished and even had a private bath with hot water. Directly outside my door was an exit that led to a swimming pool, complete with a poolside bar. Drinks, I soon discovered, were thirty cents. Near the pool was the BOQ's restaurant and nightclub, staffed by a bevy of black-tressed hostesses. So this was...
life in Saigon! Thinking back on the hardships of my earlier tour in Hau Nghia, I concluded that I could survive the rigors of rear-area life.

I took a quick shower to combat the jet-lag and headed for the front gate of the billet, where I discovered that hailing a cab in cease-fire Saigon was risky business. No sooner had I walked through the gate when several cab drivers began yelling, signalling, and grabbing me by the arm. Two cruising blue and yellow cabs almost caused an accident in the middle of the busy street when they swerved to pick me up. An American fare in cease-fire Saigon was a rare and sought-after economic opportunity. The cab drivers in the overcrowded city competed fiercely for American customers, for it was widely understood that the average American would pay double or triple the normal fare.

My driver, a wrinkled old fellow with a mouthful of gold teeth, smiled broadly as he executed a harrowing U-turn and aimed his ancient Renault for Saigon. "Dai Uy, lau qua khong gap Dai Uy," he beamed. ("Captain, I haven't seen you in a long time.") "Co phai nguoi Hy sap tro qua Viet Nam khong?" ("Is it true that the Americans are about to come back to Vietnam?")

The old man was a Saigonese with a heavy southern accent.

In one of the colloquialisms of his language, he was telling me that he hadn't seen a uniformed American captain in a long time. His words and animated tone of voice told me that he regarded me as "a sight for sore eyes." As he negotiated the traffic on Cong Ly Street, I heard the first of many reports on the economic ills of cease-fire Saigon. "From the day the Americans left, Dai Uy," he moaned, "the economic situation has gotten worse and worse. Business is dead. No one has the money to take the taxi any more. The people say that the Americans are coming back, Dai Uy. Is it true?"

I reassured my anxious questioner that Americans would remain in Saigon but that his country did not need large American military forces. The old man's face betrayed his disappointment when I refuted the latest rumor. He continued to smile, but I had long since learned that the Vietnamese smile often meant something other than happiness.

By this time, we had stopped on Tu Do Street outside the entrance to the Eden Arcade. I paid the standard Vietnamese fare of 150 piasters and extricated myself from the back seat of the

* MACV closed its doors and the last American military man departed Saigon in late March 1973, a little more than four months before I returned. With them went a healthy chunk of the total cash flow of the country. The Vietnamese never recovered from the economic vacuum created by our abrupt departure.
tiny vehicle. If I had paid the 500 piasters customarily paid by most Americans, I would have earned his obsequious expression of gratitude, the Asian smile, and his total disrespect. Any display of generosity on my part would have permitted him to tell his friends how the rich and foolish American had paid him 500 piasters for a 150 piaster ride, further proof of Vietnamese superiority over Americans. By paying him the Vietnamese fare, I would be remembered as "cheap," but I preferred to be regarded as tight-fisted rather than foolish. Most Americans didn't have to worry about such choices. Blissfully ignorant of the Vietnamese way, they paid their 500 piasters and basked in the conviction that the smiles of the Saigonese indicated appreciation of American generosity. I called it the "bwana syndrome." All they needed to complete the image was a white pith helmet.

I knew the minute I stepped from the taxi that I had erred in not wearing civilian clothes for my foray into downtown Saigon. The sight of an American Army captain strolling down the street generated an electric response from the sidewalk salesmen, cyclo drivers, and other peddlers who made the streets of Saigon a teeming mass of humanity. The reaction was the same everywhere I walked.

"Dai Uy! Dai Uy! Long time no see, Dai Uy!"
"Hey, Captain, where you been?"

As I passed the stalls offering postcards, old coins (mostly fake) and cheap oil paintings for sale, I could understand the commentary of Saigon's sidewalk society as the people caught sight of me: "Troi oil! Lau qua khong gap ong nay!" ("Dear God! Long time I haven't seen the likes of him!") And, after I playfully responded to several of them in their language, a trio of street urchins, called "Bui Doi" or "Dust of Life" by the Saigonese, preceded me everywhere, trumpeting the news that the American captain could speak Vietnamese. Like the taxi driver, the downtown crowd wanted to hear the good news -- the Americans were coming back!

Downtown Saigon was much as I remembered it. The multicolored flower stalls of Nguyen Hue Boulevard were as stunning as ever and still patrolled by a squad of predatory polaroid photographers who pestered passers-by into having souvenir pictures taken. Scarlet government propaganda banners still festooned the walls of the public buildings and monuments. Only the themes had changed. A year ago, the signs had extolled "The Heroes of An Loc" and the "Defenders of Quang Tri." Now, on a pedestrian barrier outside the Ben Thanh Market, a parti-
cularly large banner proclaimed: "The entire Vietnamese people condemn the North Vietnamese Communist clique for sabotaging the peace." Further down the street, a long red and white banner hanging outside the old Rex Theater warned: "If the native soil is still in the hands of the Republic, then we have everything. But allow the native soil to be lost into the hands of the Communists and we have lost everything!"

As I surveyed the crowds of shoppers that spilled off the sidewalks into the streets, my veteran eyes observed that Saigon's women were still the most beautiful and graceful in all Asia. Clad in brightly colored Ao Dai dresses, they walked with a grace and self-assurance that no American could fail to notice. Perched in pairs on their small Honda motorcycles, the raven-haired girls of Saigon wound their way through traffic, their oversized sunglasses and trailing skirts reflecting a striking blend of East and West.

The blast of the air horn from a military truck reminded me that something was missing from Saigon's bustling streets. It was the military traffic -- the hundreds of jeeps and trucks that had clogged the streets, belched forth exhaust fumes and hogged the road as if Saigon were a military base where civilians were only tolerated. During the war, the olive-drab
Saigon, 1973: "If the native soil is still in the hands of the republic, then we still have everything; allow the native soil to be lost into the hands of the Communists and we have lost everything."
vehicles of the American and South Vietnamese military had been as much a part of Saigon as the cyclo drivers and taxis. The cease-fire had at least wrought one improvement. Even the blue haze that hung over the city's streets from the exhaust of thousands of vehicles seemed to have diminished since my last visit. Maybe there was hope for Saigon yet. The French had designed the city to accommodate 600,000 citizens, but it had swollen to almost six times that number during the war. Now, with a cease-fire of sorts, there had been hope that some of the millions of peasants who had fled to Saigon to escape the hostilities could return to their rural lands. From my perspective, however, the capital had not lost very many people, a reality that reflected the failure of the cease-fire to take hold in the countryside. Even the round-faced, legless beggar who worked the sidewalk outside the Brinks BOQ was still on the spot where I had last seen him in 1972. (The guy's probably a millionaire, I thought, as I tossed fifty piasters into the camouflaged jungle hat that lay on the sidewalk near his stumps.)

The heat in Saigon was as oppressive as ever. I sought shelter on the veranda of the Continental Palace Hotel, where Saigon's remaining French residents still congregated for a drink in the late afternoons. I ordered a "33" beer in anticipation of a quiet break from my hectic circuit of the downtown area, totally unaware that I had chosen the worst place in Saigon if I desired privacy. The rush started the minute I sat down. In the vanguard came the inevitable hustlers and hucksters. Would the captain like to buy silkscreen Christmas cards? How about lacquerware, oil paintings, or perhaps some risque photographs? Does the captain desire female companionship? The street urchins expressed this as "go boom-boom," but the more couth, mini-skirted working girls used a more civilized approach: "We go my apartment and have un, ye?" Once the word got out that the captain was interested only in drinking his beer, the procession of commercial visitors ended. Next came the curious and hopeful. Virtually no one walked by my sidewalk table without stopping to inquire if I was the vanguard of a new flow of Americans or merely to tell me of their American friend or relative in California or Kentucky. As I talked with a Vietnamese air force lieutenant who had trained in Texas, others lingered around us to eavesdrop on our conversation. The Saigonese were entranced by the opportunity to talk to an American in their own language, and they were clearly entertained by my American accent. Without exception, all had heard that the American military was about to return to their country.
I quickly learned that the deep-seated psychological need of the Vietnamese for the physical presence of uniformed Americans had not diminished since my tour in Hau Nghia province. If anything, I sensed an even heightened sense of insecurity during my first few days back in Saigon. It was as if the Saigonese had an overwhelming desire for some form of reassurance that would say, "you aren't alone in this thing. We are with you." American-built F-5 fighters or M-113 armored personnel carriers could not provide these assurances, no matter how numerous, tangible, and useful they might be. The Vietnamese psyche demanded reassurance in the familiar sight of the tall GI in jungle fatigues. Even if the Americans belonged to the culturally deprived group known collectively as "nguoi Tay" (Westerners), the exigencies of the moment demanded the American presence. Since I symbolized what was needed at the time, the Saigonese were according me a hero's welcome. It was not a comfortable feeling, for I sensed that my greeters expected reassurances that I simply could not provide. It would not be the last time during the cease-fire that I would feel uncomfortable around the Vietnamese.

The following morning, I caught a ride on the shuttle van that serviced the billet and reported for work at the Defense Attaché Office (DAO). As I walked from the bus stop through the gate, I recalled that I had once conducted an NVA POW unchallenged through this same gate on our way to an interview with a MACV general officer and had thereby precipitated a shakeup in physical security procedures. Now, with the MACV colors furled and safely deposited in some stateside museum, I fully expected to find the famed "Pentagon East" building virtually empty. Instead, I discovered that the uniformed personnel of MACV Headquarters had been replaced by hundreds of American and Vietnamese civilians. Hosts of ao dai-clad Vietnamese secretaries glided from office to office as they moved the paperwork generated by all large headquarters. The DAO looked like a bachelor's paradise.

Major Lilley planned to give me an introductory briefing that morning after I had been "read on" for access to the kinds of classified information safeguarded by the Special Security Office (SSO). The purpose of this briefing was to inform me of travel limitations and other restrictions imposed on me because of my status as Executive Officer of the SSO. A civilian security specialist, Walt Mestre, did the honors, after which I joined the major in his office.

Lilley explained that, as a part of the US Embassy, the
"Pentagon East" Former MACV Headquarters, Saigon. During the "ceasefire," the home of the Defense Attache Office (DAO). It was destroyed by the US Marines at the conclusion of the evacuation in April, 1975.
Defense Attache Office assisted in the administration of the US military assistance program to the South Vietnamese. For this reason, the entire operation was heavily staffed with supply and budgetary specialists. Even the Defense Attache, Major General John Murray, had been a Transportation Corps officer before he became a general. General Murray's complement of fifty military men included officers representing all services organized into Army, Navy and Air Force materiel divisions. The personnel of these divisions spent considerable time in coordination with their South Vietnamese counterparts and assisted in development of requirements to support the allocation and expenditure of military assistance funds. Also included in the DAO complex were several tenant units that were not associated with security assistance, among which were the Joint Casualty Resolution Center and the US Delegation of the Four Party Joint Military Team. Both of these organizations were involved in the effort to resolve the fate of the missing and the dead of the war.

Since the cease-fire had not yet brought a total cessation of hostilities, Lieutenant Colonel Jimmy Harris' small Current Intelligence Section (CIS) worked overtime in an attempt to keep abreast of the rapidly changing military situation. Every morning during a ritual known as the "walk-through," CIS personnel
briefed General Murray on the Communist threat. Since the section was co-located with us in the secure area (the "tank," as we called it), our office was responsible for admitting the cleared personnel of the General's entourage every morning. Major Lilley warned that we had to exercise extreme care lest we inadvertently admit an uncleared person into the vault, thereby triggering a time-consuming investigation. Since both State Department and CIA personnel from downtown usually attended the briefings, one of my first jobs was to meet everyone and learn names and faces as rapidly as possible.

The second major mission of the Special Security Office was to prepare and courier the daily "Black Book" to General Murray and his senior staff. The Black Book contained the lastest sensitive intelligence and a daily summary of global events. The SSO's job was to sort out the messages that came through our twenty-four hour communications center and put together this daily classified reading file.

Still another SSO responsibility was the pickup or delivery chores when General Murray or his deputy received or sent "back-channel" messages (also called "eyes only" messages). I knew from past experience that general officers frequently communicated with one another via this "privacy communications channel,

which was handled independently of normal message traffic.

Initially, I was impressed with the importance of the SSO mission and my responsibilities. I felt that I faced a unique and fascinating experience in Saigon in a position that placed me in proximity to the higher levels of policy implementation and decision-making. I suspected that the denouement of the Vietnam conflict was in the offing and considered myself fortunate in having the opportunity to witness events of major historical import. A military intelligence officer with an interest in Southeast Asian affairs could not have been better placed than in Saigon during the cease-fire period.

Nonetheless, I was not overly pleased with one or two of the items that surfaced during my in-briefing. I felt that my role as doorman for the secure area would not offer much challenge, and I was not comfortable with the travel restrictions that my position imposed on me. My clearance for special intelligence did not permit me to travel anywhere in Vietnam outside the city limits of Saigon. Of course, the basis for this restriction was security. The in-place cease-fire had resulted in a patchwork juxtaposition of government and enemy-controlled areas often called the "leopard-spot" configuration. Thus, it was entirely possible that anyone travelling the length and breadth of the
country could blunder into hostile forces. In fact, this had already occurred on at least one occasion shortly after the cease-fire. An American civilian contractor had driven his pickup truck directly into an enemy roadblock on the highway in the Mekong Delta. Communist troops had riddled the vehicle with automatic weapons fire and taken him into custody. Travel restrictions were designed to prevent similar fates from befalling people with access to sensitive information. I was unhappy because my travel restriction did not permit me to visit friends from my former tour in Hau Nghia province. Furthermore, I wasn't even allowed to visit neighboring Bien Hoa province, a restriction that prevented me from visiting friends at the Corps Interrogation Center or at the Region III offices of the CIA. The travel restriction thus effectively cut me off from many contacts that I had developed during my first tour. The Hau Nghia restriction made some sense to me, since my former home was near the Cambodian border. But the Bien Hoa ban seemed out of touch with reality. I decided at the outset that I would work to relax this restriction. The chances that a cleared American would fall into Communist hands on the Saigon-Bien Hoa highway were simply nonexistent, at least in 1973.

Major Lilley also informed me that our office would be civilianized as soon as the implementing details could be worked out. Since Washington had agreed to limit the DAO to fifty military personnel, General Murray had indicated his desire to convert the seven SSO military slots to civilian spaces to permit assignment of seven additional logistics officers to his overworked staff. The target date for this change was some time in January 1974. Major Lilley was leaving within a month, and he advised me to begin job hunting if I wished to remain in Saigon; otherwise, I would be reassigned to another location in Asia for the remainder of my tour.

I thus found myself in the strange role of scouting for a new job during my first week in Saigon. The last thing I wanted was reassignment to Thailand or Korea. I first contacted Colonel Bill Le Gro, Chief of the DAO Intelligence Branch, but he had no place in his organization for an MI captain. In fact, the colonel had only three military officers working for him, and all three of them were lieutenant colonels. Even the analysts and briefers in Colonel Harris' section were civilians, most of whom were on loan from their jobs at the Defense Intelligence Agency. There was no job in the rank-heavy DAO for a junior intelligence officer, regardless of his qualifications.
I had heard of at least one other captain in Saigon, and I met him by accident one night in the BOQ bar. Captain Jim McDonald worked for the US Delegation of the Four Party Joint Military Team (JMT). Over a drink, I explained to Jim that I wished to remain in Saigon but that I had only one tentative job offer. A Bangkok-based military intelligence unit had a position, but the job would require only occasional brief trips to Saigon. Jim was leaving within a couple of weeks, but his replacement was already on board. I told him that I would be available for reassignment by the end of January and that I had the educational and language background for Vietnam duty. Jim then described the Four Party Joint Military Team's responsibility for conducting negotiations with the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong on the MIA question. He depicted the duty as both frustrating and fascinating, highlighted by the opportunity to make regular flights to Hanoi. That was enough for me. I told Jim that I was interested in a job, and he promised to line me up for an interview.

A few days later, Colonel Jack Fitzgerald, the JMT adjutant, contacted me to schedule an interview with Colonel Bill Tombaugh, the Chief of the US Delegation. Shortly thereafter, I sat across a desk from Colonel Tombaugh, a square-jawed infantry officer. During the interview, Tombaugh impressed upon me the seriousness of our obligation to the families of the missing and the dead and the need for dedicated professionals to carry out this duty.

Several days later, Colonel Fitzgerald informed me that he was drafting a request to Washington for my reassignment to the US Delegation at the turn of the year, and, unless there was a change, I would be assigned as a liaison officer to the Communist delegations on Tan Son Nhut. I had found a job, and a good one at that. Thus far, I had been able to see the Communist side of the war through the eyes of prisoners and defectors. Now I would have an opportunity to meet our adversaries on their own turf.
III. PEACE WAS NOT AT HAND

After securing my position in Saigon, I busied myself in contacting my many Vietnamese friends. I was particularly anxious to communicate with Major Sang, the Hau Nghia province Military Security Service (MSS) Chief, for an update on developments in the countryside since my departure. Several friends from my days at Ft. Huachuca lived in Saigon, and I knew that I could depend on them for a candid Vietnamese perception of the current military and political situation. I had already become concerned about what I was hearing from Saigon's "man in the street." Hopefully, military morale was better than that of the average Saigonese.

Even though I regularly attended the DAO morning briefings on current operations and intelligence, I wanted to plug myself into as many Vietnamese sources of information as possible. I knew from past experience that the Americans frequently received incomplete information on the friendly situation through normal Vietnamese channels. During my Hau Nghia tour, it had taken me months to penetrate the smokescreen surrounding the frailties of our ally. Now, totally reliant on the press and official American perceptions of the developing situation, I had the uncomfortable feeling that I was not sufficiently in touch with the realities of cease-fire Vietnam.

Within a few weeks of my arrival in Saigon, I managed to establish telephone contact with the Province Operations Center in Hau Nghia. Since I could not travel to Bao Trai, I had decided to invite my Hau Nghia friends to visit me in Saigon. For a starter, I invited Major Sang to meet me for lunch at Saigon's Ngoc Huong Restaurant. Slightly more than a year had passed since Sang had presented me with a statue of Emperor Nguyen Hue on the eve of my return to the States. I knew from reading the operations reports that fierce fighting had occurred in Hau Nghia on the eve of the cease-fire. Major Sang could brief me on those events and on the military situation after nine months of "peace" in Hau Nghia.

At noon a few days later, I met the grinning Sang on the sidewalk in front of the Ngoc Huong, one of Saigon's best North Vietnamese restaurants. We shook hands and retreated to an interior table where we could enjoy our meal and talk without harassment by beggars and shoe-shine hustlers. During a leisurely meal, Sang briefed me on significant developments since
I had left Hau Nghia.

The North Vietnamese had tried desperately to gain a foothold in the center of the province just prior to the anticipated cease-fire in October. Obviously determined to hold territory astride strategically important Highway 1, NVA units had spent August and September rebuilding and then had launched a series of major intrusions into heavily-populated, government-controlled hamlets in Trang Bang and Cu Chi districts. Even though main force NVA units had conducted the attacks, the Hau Nghia Forces (RF) had ejected the invaders at every point of intrusion. Unfortunately, the cost of these operations had been high. The 30,000 civilian victims of the earlier spring offensive had just been resettled when the new NVA attacks burst upon the province and created 15,000 new refugees. Still, the October fighting had resulted in a series of important victories for the Hau Nghia forces. According to Sang, enemy prisoners revealed that the North Vietnamese had expected the cease-fire at the end of October. NVA commanders had launched several bold assaults under the assumption that the cease-fire would take effect after they seized their objectives and would protect them from South Vietnamese counterattacks. Unfortunately for the Communists, the unexpected breakdown of the Paris negotiations postponed the cease-fire, but it was too late for them to notify local NVA commanders. The result, Sang gloated, had been a catastrophe for the Communists. When the North Vietnamese abandoned their safe jungle sanctuaries and occupied the hamlets along Highway 1, counterattacking South Vietnamese forces decimated the exposed Communist light infantry. It was a repetition of the disastrous NVA defeats of the Easter Offensive at the hands of the Hau Nghia Regional Forces. In less than two weeks, more than 500 North Vietnamese regulars had died in Hau Nghia at the cost of less than 100 friendly lives.

But this debacle had not deterred the Communists from subsequent attempts to establish their presence in Hau Nghia before the guns stilled. In November and December, the rebuilt 271st Regiment had repeated its springtime incursions into the populated areas of Duc Hoa district, only to be ejected once again by Hau Nghia's vaunted militia troops. Sang recalled with obvious relish that frustrated local VC cadre had spent the last days before the cease-fire painting over the yellow and red government flags stenciled on rural homes and destroying photographs of President Thieu. The cease-fire had gone into effect on 27 January 1973 with the outmaneuvered Communists in control of no new territory in Hau Nghia. With assistance
from the diplomats and only minimal help from the regular army (ARVN), the Hau Nghia Regional Forces had once again defeated the North Vietnamese.

Sang explained how civilians and government troops in Hau Nghia had reacted to the cease-fire. Initially, everyone had welcomed the cease-fire, but this initial optimism had been short-lived. Events had quickly dispelled the notion that the Paris Agreement would somehow cause the Communist threat to disappear. The cease-fire had been followed by a brief lull in the fighting as the battered NVA units withdrew to their base areas to recover from their costly last-minute jousting for position. The few ralliers and prisoners who fell into South Vietnamese hands told of massive resupply efforts in the "liberated zones" and Cambodian sanctuaries. Whole convoys of Russian-supplied Molotov trucks were now transporting supplies and ammunition to the North Vietnamese Army, which was rebuilding with impunity under the protection of the cease-fire. As the Communists recovered, the level of hostilities in Hau Nghia escalated in spite of the cease-fire. Enemy units had begun to penetrate Hau Nghia's hamlets and exhort the people to join the "political struggle" against the "puppet regime." Government troops had reacted with spoiling operations and night ambushes.

In Hau Nghia, both sides were involved in routine and wholesale violations of the cease-fire. Sang admitted that the morale of Hau Nghia's government forces had begun to drop.

Although the continued fighting was discouraging, Sang insisted that the decline in popular morale was caused primarily by the deteriorating economic situation. The price of gasoline and rice had jumped sharply since the American withdrawal. In August 1972, gasoline had sold for 31 piasters a liter; it now sold for 105 piasters. Everyone felt the squeeze, but the underpaid military suffered the greatest hardship. For example, Sang now received only twenty liters of gasoline a month for his government jeep. Anything he used above that amount had to come out of his own pocket. To compound the problem, President Thieu had gone to elaborate lengths to blame the deteriorating situation on the departed Americans. Thieu had made no secret of the fact that he had resisted the terms of the Paris Agreement until Washington had all but forced him to sign it. Sang explained that many South Vietnamese viewed the Paris Agreement as a sellout of their country's interests. They were nervously

* ARVN: Army of Vietnam, the South Vietnamese Army, as distinct from the "territorial forces," or militia, which consisted of the Regional Forces (RF) and the Popular Forces (PF). In general, the RF and PF were more lightly armed than the regular ARVN and operated in their native province or district.
aware that the North Vietnamese Army had remained in Vietnam and that the Americans had gone home. According to Sang, most South Vietnamese could only laugh when American government officials insisted that restrictions imposed by the Paris Agreements on manpower replacements, resupply, and use of Cambodian and Laotian sanctuaries would eventually force the NVA units to withdraw to the north. He explained that people were becoming increasingly bitter in the face of the continued fighting and the stagnating South Vietnamese economy. Not surprisingly, an increasing number of people were laying the blame at the feet of President Thieu.

On a brighter note, Sang informed me that Hau Nghia had a new province chief and a new police commander. After a little more than a year as province chief, the vain Colonel Hau had been transferred to another job under the shadow of suspicion involving missing provincial funds. The rumor was that the Long An military court might indict him. His replacement, Colonel Soan, was a marine officer with a superior record for honesty and aggressive leadership. Sang optimistically compared his new boss with Colonel Thanh, a former Hau Nghia province chief who had been assassinated by the Communists in 1972. The corrupt police chief, Colonel Ty, had finally been arrested after the American advisors had exposed him for taking bribes to release Vietcong prisoners. His replacement had already introduced badly needed reforms in the national police organization and, in the process, had eliminated a major source of popular discontent with the government.

Sang reminded me of Lanh, an NVA POW whom I had convinced to cooperate with the government in 1972. As a reward for his assistance, Lanh had been granted amnesty by the province chief. The ex-NVA was undergoing basic training at the Quang Trung Training Center, after which he would serve in the Hau Nghia Regional Forces. I felt a pang of guilt on hearing this news as I recalled Lanh's determination never to carry a weapon again. Perhaps he could accept his fate if the cease-fire stopped the fighting. But, if the conflict continued to escalate, my NVA friend would again find himself stalking the mosquito-infested base areas along the Vam Co Dong River. This time, however, he would carry an M-16 instead of an AK-47. Somehow, I felt responsible for whatever happened to him.

By now, Sang and I had talked our way through four courses of shrimp, pork, fried rice, and crab rolls, and it was time for me to return to work. Before we parted, Sang invited me to Hau Nghia for a homecoming feast of beer and dog meat. I
promised that I would do my best to swing a trip to Bao Trai but expressed doubt because of my travel restrictions. I asked Sang to give my address to my friends in Hau Nghia and pass on a standing invitation for them to visit me in Saigon.

Even though I had not yet succeeded in obtaining permission to visit Hau Nghia, I could now travel to Bien Hoa. Our headquarters had agreed to redefine the Saigon secure area to include Bien Hoa and Long Binh, and I wasted no time in heading for my former haunts by the Dong Nai River. At the Consul General's offices (the old CIA MR-III headquarters), I looked up Orrin DeForest, a CIA friend who in 1971 and 1972 had done a remarkable job of rolling up the Vietcong infrastructure in Trang Bang district. Orrin was fuming with frustration at the restrictions that prevented air strikes against increasing numbers of lucrative targets reported by his sources. The Communists could truck men and supplies down the infiltration trail in direct violation of the treaty, but the Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF) couldn't hit them when they were located --- some game!

In Ho Nai, a suburb of Bien Hoa populated by North Vietnamese Catholics, I located Lieutenant Thanh, my old counterpart from Hau Nghia's intelligence and recon platoon. Thanh had since been reassigned to Long Thanh district in Bien Hoa province. While his dark-skinned, Hanoi-born wife served "33" beer and ice, Thanh and I briefly reminisced about Hau Nghia before turning to the cease-fire. Like virtually all of my Vietnamese friends, Thanh was disturbed by what was happening to his country. As in Hau Nghia, there was no cease-fire in Long Thanh district. Enemy military incursions into government-controlled areas were increasing.

"You know, Dai Uy," Thanh observed, "I am a North Vietnamese, and I understand our enemy's determination. No piece of paper will stop Hanoi from its attempts to conquer South Vietnam. The Paris Agreement accomplished nothing more than to provide the NVA a badly-needed rest and eliminate the American military as a factor in the war. Anyone who understands the situation knows that President Thieu will never share political power with the Communists. For this reason, I know that we will see another major offensive sooner or later. We will never give the Communists in negotiations what they didn't win on the battlefield."

Almost all of my friends in the South Vietnamese military shared this view. I had heard it so often since my return to Saigon that I had memorized it. It was an article of faith that
the terms of the Paris Agreement contained the seeds of an inevitable return to military confrontation similar to the 1972 offensive. Even though their armed forces had performed well since the cease-fire, the Vietnamese were extremely uneasy with the new equation that lacked American participation. Almost everyone I met raised the same question: "Will the American Air Force intervene when (not "if") the Communists launch their next offensive?" Clearly, the American withdrawal had put a severe strain on South Vietnamese nerves.

I was dismayed that the Vietnamese outlook could take such a drastic downturn so quickly. A little more than a year earlier, I had boarded a "freedom bird" to the States with memories of an almost cocky South Vietnamese military, flushed with confidence gained from its victories over the North Vietnamese. The defense of An Loc and the repulse of North Vietnamese armored assaults during the Easter Offensive had been therapeutic, and one had the feeling that Vietnamization had jelled as a result of the NVA defeats. But now, in place of smugness and confidence, I sensed a disturbing edginess among South Vietnamese in all walks of life. I couldn't really label the attitudes I had encountered as defeatist, but I had no doubt that there was deep South Vietnamese concern for the future. One Air Force officer explained his feelings to me as we debated the issue of South Vietnamese violations of the cease-fire.

"You see, Dai Uy, we feel like the Frenchman who agreed to a duel of honor with pistols. Standing back to back with his opponent, he began to take fifteen paces without looking back. His opponent, who had no scruples, turned around, stalked him from behind, and shot him down before he could turn around. The man who played by the rules lost his life. That is how we feel. The North Vietnamese Communists have no scruples, and they are not playing by the rules. Like the honorable but naive Frenchman, we will lose at such a dangerous game if we blindly follow the rules."