Many Americans in the DAO were incensed at the stories of the local population looting the wreckage, and it required some time for tempers to subside. One of the lucky DAO women who had not gone on the flight was so outraged at the "chauvinist practice" of sending women and children first that it required all of my powers of persuasion to restrain her from protesting to General Smith that her friends had been "railroaded to their deaths." It was a deeply distressing time for everyone. April was only four days old, but we had already witnessed the fall of Nha Trang and the loss of many close friends. Thus far, the month had certainly lived up to T. S. Elliott's description: it had been "the cruelest month" for all of us.

Hanoi quickly reacted to "Operation Babylift" and our thinly veiled commencement of evacuation operations. At their weekly press concerence and over Radio Hanoi, the Communists sharply condemned the Ford administration and the "Thieu clique" for "forcing people to evacuate and for kidnapping and transporting Vietnamese children to the United States." Liberation Radio claimed that "tens of thousands of children have been herded together with their parents into detention and concentration camps." Life in the "liberated zones" was naturally quite different. There, the Communists boasted, "children have started a peaceful and joyful life and can study in peace, independence, and freedom." Hanoi attacked the United States for "propagandizing noisily in monk's clothing about the humanity in its cruel plan to evacuate children with a view to diverting US and world opinion and continuing its involvement in South Vietnam and its aid to the Thieu puppet clique."1

I briefed Colonel Madison that Hanoi apparently would not
give the South Vietnamese the opportunity to regroup. Some
pundits in the Embassy and in Washington theorized that the
North Vietnamese would soon be forced to pause and "digest" their sudden gains and that they would have to detail large
numbers of troops to occupy the recently captured northern
provinces. Even though the NVA had not shown much flexibility in past offensives, I feared that Hanoi had learned from experience. If this were true and if General Dung promptly exploited his success, Saigon could not be defended. With this as a distinct possibility, we needed to begin serious planning to evacuate our Vietnamese employees.

Indeed, there were strong indicators that Hanoi had decided to go for broke. One morning, for example, my in-box turned up this ominous passage that had been read over the Communist radio:

The southern revolution is presently at a stage where it is developing in leaps and bounds, making as much progress in one day as it did in 20 years. In order to fully exploit this one-in-a thousand years opportunity, all of our armed forces and people must concentrate all their moral strength and force to achieve total victory for the revolutionary cause of the liberation of the south and to bring to a glorious conclusion our people's 30-year fight for independence and freedom...We must attack in a way that does not give the enemy time to react.

Equally ominous were the words of National Liberation Front Chairman Nguyen Huu Tho. When a Japanese leftist reporter asked him if recent developments in the military situation portended heightened offensive operations, Tho answered cryptically: "Desperate mice bite cats."3

After the harrowing narrow escape of Americans from Danang and Nha Trang, I was not confident that the Embassy really understood the problems of evacuating large numbers of people under hostile conditions -- an endeavor that was fundamentally a military operation. Tony Lawson insisted that the Embassy's evacuation plan began and ended with the phrase, "Everyone should go to Tan Son Nhut and get on a plane." I soon learned that Tony was wrong -- but not by much.

By early April, I had been designated as "Resident Warden" of my billet on Hoang Dieu Street. In this capacity, I attended a meeting at the Embassy for a briefing on "the plan." Embassy planners had designated twenty-nine American billets in Saigon as "safe areas" for staging. When the decision was made to evacuate, Embassy Security Chief Marv Garrett explained that the American radio would broadcast a signal to alert all Americans and certain "Third Country Nationals" to gather at these sites. The signal would be the playing of "I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas," followed by the announcer's remark
Garrett instructed us that our job would then be to "select some strong men, man the gates of our safe sites, and admit only Americans, Third Country nationals, and local national employees with families," in that order. Once everyone was safely assembled in the staging areas, we would be bussed to Tan Son Nhut and flown out of the country.

Haunted by the specter of Danang, several of us pointed out many obvious difficulties of such a scheme to Garrett, not the least of which was the likelihood of civil disorder and panic. He responded by assuring us that planners understood this difficulty and that weapons (shotguns!) would be issued if necessary. He then made a note for himself to "check and see how many bullhorns we have available for crowd control." Looking around at my fellow resident wardens, I could just imagine that group of mild-mannered government employees taming panicky crowds of Saigonese with a bullhorn and a shotgun. I decided that the Embassy's plan was an accident waiting to happen.

Deputy Chief of Mission Wolfgang Lehmann spoke briefly and insisted to our incredulous group that "no evacuation of the US mission is underway." I bit my tongue and remained silent with great difficulty. Surely, he knew better than this -- or did he? I could appreciate the Ambassador's determined refusal to acknowledge an American evacuation: the delicate military-political situation forced him into this position. But the naive, ostrich-like approach to evacuation planning and Mr. Lehmann's attempts at reassurance were disturbing. Immediately after the meeting adjourned, I returned to the office and drafted a memo to Colonel Madison. The subject was "Responsibility for US Delegation Local National Employees."

1. While the time frame for total evacuation of the US Mission is unclear, it is nonetheless evident that evacuation/withdrawal will take place.

2. In this event, the US Delegation must accept responsibility for our LN employees, many of whom have been exposed to the Communists during their service in the Delegation.

3. While there are countless versions of how the entire US Mission intends to approach this problem, I am convinced that at this time, there is no firm decision on the key questions: "Who goes, who stays?" "What about families of LN employees? "What means of assembly-exfiltration, etc.?" In fact, since plans for evacuation of US nationals remain in flux, it is not surprising that the sticky question of LN's remains unanswered.

In the next two paragraphs, I described the performances of
Marv Garrett and Mr. Lehmann and then turned to the final act of the meeting:

6. Mr. Boudreau, Counselor for Administrative Affairs, dealt with the question of our obligations to US Mission LN employees. He addressed the question after it was pointed out that Ambassador Martin had personally committed the Embassy to "do its best" to evacuate "key LN personnel" of one US business firm in Saigon. Mr. Boudreau pointed out that "We could be talking about 200,000 people," and that the problem increases when one considers the task of gathering and moving such a crowd (with perhaps 200,000 additional hangers-on). Mr. Boudreau informed the group that 21 LN employees of the Embassy wrote a letter to Ambassador Martin asking what the US intended to do about mission LN employees and families. Ambassador Martin personally interviewed the drafter of the letter and assured him, "When the airplane taking you out leaves, I will personally be there to see you off." Thus, Mr. Boudreau pointed out, a commitment has been made.

8. The foregoing paragraphs demonstrate that:

Our commitment is undeniable. It has been verbalized by Ambassador Martin himself.

The problem until now has the planners (at the American Embassy, anyway) at bay. I am convinced that if evacuation were ordered in the near future, the US Mission would fail miserably in its obligation to LN employees.

9. In view of the above, and keeping in mind that there is a chance that the US Delegation could depart the RVN prior to any general evacuation, it is essential that steps be taken now to insure we do not fail in our obligations to our employees. (If the US Delegation should depart early, who will look after our people?) Furthermore, according to Embassy spokesmen, the criteria for evacuation include persons in sensitive positions (intelligence, and presumably our organization) and those persons whose talents/training would be essential upon reestablishment of a US Mission in the evacuated country. The mission of the US Delegation does not depend upon the political/military outcome in South Vietnam. Negotiations on the NLA issue will clearly continue, if not in Saigon, then elsewhere. The US Delegation's trained and experienced LN personnel are essential to our operation. For this reason, and the obvious moral imperative involved, I strongly recommend that you take immediate steps to insure that under no circumstances will the US Delegation abandon its LN personnel. The US government has committed itself to Filipinos, Chinese, and West Germans -- to name a few -- not to mention "key LNs" of at least one US business firm. The US Delegation must take the initiative on behalf of our LNs -- we cannot afford to entrust this mission to any outside plan, person, or organization.

Colonel Madison was equally firm in his determination not to abandon our employees. He once again reassured them that they were indispensable to our mission and would not be abandoned. In spite of these assurances, the recent American failures in Danang and Nha Trang loomed as ugly precedents.

As Mr. Ngo reminded me, good intentions were the basis of our presence in Vietnam from the beginning. Our employees were looking for action, and action to them meant a plan to take care of them and their families. With Colonel Madison's permission, I instructed them to begin planning to flee their country and to regard seven persons per family as a planning figure for the evacuation. Since the average Vietnamese
family group frequently numbered ten or more persons, the effect of this guidance was devastating. Morale in the office sank even lower.

In the meantime, the North Vietnamese offensive ground on. The population of the mountain resort of Dalat streamed into Saigon -- a particularly distressing thing for the Saigonese, who held a special affection for the picturesque mountain retreat. The price of vegetables at the Central Market promptly doubled -- truck farming was Dalat's major contribution to the Saigon economy. Tensions escalated even further when a VNAF defector bombed the Presidential Palace on 8 April. Even though the bombs caused only light damage, the bold act dramatized the Thieu government's precarious position. When the sleek aircraft made its first pass on the palace, we didn't know whether we were witnessing a coup d'etat or an enemy attack, and our doubts were symptomatic of President Thieu's mounting difficulties. "Liberation Radio," later cleared up the mystery. The pilot was Nguyen Thanh Trung, a VNAF lieutenant who had long been a secret Vietcong cadre (or had he defected and suddenly become a cadre?). After the palace raid, Trung had flown his F5 to a hero's welcome at an enemy-held airfield in Military Region II. He left behind him a city that had moved one step closer to the psychological brink as a result of his parting gesture. Within a few days, the Communists began to boast about Trung's deed. Thereafter, an almost daily feature of Liberation Radio's broadcasts was a special appeal directed at Vietnamese Air Force personnel. The message was clear: VNAF personnel should emulate Trung -- or else. It is worth noting here:

The South Vietnam People's Liberation Armed Forces Command urgently calls on the troops, NCOs, technicians and officers in the Air Force of the Nguyen van Thieu puppet administration to clearly realize the situation, to follow the example set by the patriotic 1st Lieutenant Nguyen Thanh Trung, and to urgently seek an opportunity to act to their greatest benefit and to that of the nation. Hesitation means committing crimes against the fatherland and courting disaster. Let you, brothers, refuse to set out to bomb, strafe, and kill the people and oppose the Liberation Armed Forces. Take antiwar action. Achieve merits and fly your aircraft to the liberated zone. Use aircraft, bombs, and munitions to smash the den of the Nguyen van Thieu clique... Those who deliberately continue to oppose the people and the Liberation Armed Forces will certainly be punished.

The VNAF pilots were unreceptive to this blend of appeal and threat. In fact, VNAF C-130 aircraft were then engaged in a series of destructive air raids against the massed NVA forces that ringed the city of Xuan Loc on the eastern approaches to Saigon. When the VNAF pilots finally decided to fly their aircraft out of the war zone, their destination was either
Thailand or the carriers of the Seventh Fleet, not the "safety of the liberated zones."

By 11 April, Saigon was all but surrounded by six NVA divisions: Americans in Cambodia were preparing to evacuate Phnom Penh within a matter of hours; our delegation had established an "alternate command post" in Thailand; and we were struggling to maintain the trust of our employees, who could not shake the idea that they were about to be betrayed. Under these circumstances, the continued execution of our weekly Hanoi liaison flight was difficult to explain to our counterparts. It seemed somehow inappropriate to go through the routine motions of a museum tour and luncheon in Hanoi while North Vietnam's army tightened its ring around Saigon, but, on 11 April, I made still another trip north.

Saigon was tense; Hanoi was the opposite. The usually quiet North Vietnamese capital was crowded with people, both military and civilians. Brightly colored propaganda banners festooned the center of the tree-shaded city, and from the utility poles hung vertical streamers and the crossed flags of North Vietnam and the Vietcong. The banners extolled "Giant Victories" in the south, and touted the "fraternal brotherhood" of the Hanoi government and its southern faction. One giant sign outside the Hoa Binh Hotel proclaimed "Hearty Congratulations to the Soldiers and People of the South On Their General Uprising and Gigantic Victories! 1975 -- The Year of Victory!" Outside the Hoa Binh Hotel, children reached out to touch the hand of a grim-faced American Air Force officer. The Hanoi government had already commenced its victory celebration.

Our visit had gotten off to a somber beginning when I informed our escort officer (Major Huyen, as usual) of the deaths of our people in the C5A crash. The major received this news in silence, which he maintained until our bus approached the Doumer Bridge. Then the usually easy-going officer began to talk. "Our Foreign Ministry has denounced the US scheme of refugee-orphan relief as a crime similar to those committed during the Hitler era."

I was in no mood for this kind of polemic. "Major," I fired back, "I have always believed you to be an educated, intelligent person. Therefore, I refuse to believe that you really believe what you just said."

Major Huyen glared at me, but did not reply. It would be a cold visit. The heavy silence continued until we had
begun our lunch at the hotel. When one of the South Viet-
namese officers attempted to lighten the atmosphere by ask­
ing our hosts when they would visit Dalat, we suddenly found
ourselves in the midst of a bitter debate, unlike anything
we had ever experienced in Hanoi. Our North Vietnamese hosts
glared over their success on the battlefield, and the South
Vietnamese, stung by the sarcasm and insults, lashed back.
No one at the table could avoid the flak during the long and
acrimonious exchange. While I argued with Major Huyen over
the merits of socialism versus democracy, Mr. Ngo fended off
three North Vietnamese at once. The supercilious Mr. Quang
had attempted to browbeat the feisty interpreter by ridi-
culing the ARVN. "We scared the hell out of your soldiers so
that all they did was run, run, and run," Quang crowed.

The quick-witted Ngo responded without hesitation: "That
they ran fast proves how they feared your 'liberation.' They
ran away because they thought the rug was being pulled from
under their feet because of rumors of a secret agreement to
let you have the land above Nha Trang and Dalat. So, fear
gave them wings, not the fear of being killed in combat, but
the fear of not being quick enough and having to live under
your regime."

Ngo's impudence got an immediate response from Major Huyen.
"Mr. Ngo, I don't think you know what the word communism or
socialism means."

Ngo ignored the major's angry tone of voice and replied
calmly: "I admit that many of us who are anti-Communist don't
understand what communism is, but I can see clearly that you
who are against us don't understand one bit what freedom is
either. Posterity may judge that we were both foolish."

Major Huyen could not accept this remark. "History will
be on our side. Hasn't history shown you that more and more
people representing the progressive majority of mankind are
embracing socialism as the best political system? You cannot
go against the force of history."

"You claim the force of history is on your side," Ngo
responded, "and I claim that it is on our side. Since that
can only be settled in the future, let's wait for a few hundred
more years to see who is right, and let no one assert now
that he is completely right if he really wants national re-
conciliation and concord."

Later, as our bus moved back to the airport, Major Huyen
abruptly changed the tenor of our discussion by insisting
that he "could see no obstacle to good relations between the
Major General Homer D. Smith, the Defense Attache whose foresight led to extensive prior planning and resulted in the smooth evacuation of more than 5,000 persons from the DAO complex within nine hours.

With Major Huyen in Hanoi, 11 April 1975.
United States and Vietnam." As if aware that this was our final meeting, he volunteered that he admired and respected me and that, in regard to the Vietnam situation, he "knew what was in my heart." I responded that I desired peace for the Vietnamese people, but, on the basis of our lunchtime debate, I seriously doubted that he knew what was in my heart.

At the terminal, I suggested to Major Huyen that, instead of condemning our evacuation efforts, his government should be grateful to Washington. After all, was not every anti-Communist Vietnamese who fled to the United States one less opponent for the new regime to worry about? As we shook hands for the last time, I reiterated this point and suggested that Hanoi should let us take our Vietnamese friends and depart Saigon in peace.

The major responded with a half-smile. "We have been trying to get you to leave our country for twenty years, Dai Uy. You may therefore rest assured that, when you are finally ready to go, we will not stand in your way."

As the C-130 winged its way back to Saigon, Mr. Ngo became embroiled in a debate with the officers of the South
Vietnamese delegation. The subject was President Thieu.

Later, Ngo wrote of the exchange in his trip report:

With regards to President Thieu, I told them that if I were he, I would resign so that all the national efforts could be united against the enemy because he had become so unpopular as to do more harm than good to the nation in his present position. However, I would request to continue to serve the country as commander of a special division and I would go to where the enemy threat was the worst and set the fighting example myself. If he did that and proved to be as good as his words, he would become a national hero and, come the next election, he would win the presidency again in a landslide. Major Thinh and Captain Loc nodded concurrence with me but Lt. Lap disagreed, saying hotly, "If he steps down, who can lead the country? That would be playing into the hands of the enemy." Only then did I suddenly remember I should watch out what I say in his presence as he is from the security service. I thought wryly to myself that my tongue would get me into trouble yet. I'll watch my tongue carefully but I have no fear.

We approached Tan Son Nhut at 12,000 feet and then executed a dizzying corkscrew descent to the runway. During the stomach-churning approach, an airman sat in the open door of the C-130 with a flare pistol and scanned the sky for the telltale track of heat-seeking antiaircraft missiles. The Air Force had learned that a timely shot from a flare pistol could cause a missile guidance system to lock onto the flare. As our wheels finally touched the concrete runway, I noticed that my palms were clammy with sweat. Our Saigon landings had become a riskier ordeal than landing in Hanoi.
XVI. "...TO THE LAST BULLET AND THE LAST GRAIN OF RICE"

General Smith's staff developed an evacuation plan based on a worst case situation and on the recent experiences in Danang and Nha Trang. Its essence was an aerial movement plan to supplement the bussing scheme. In the event civil disorder precluded movement by bus from the assembly points to the DAO, the plan called for an Air America helicopter shuttle from predesignated pickup points around Saigon to the DAO compound. Heavy lift helicopters from aircraft carriers already on station would ferry people from the DAO to the fleet.

By the middle of April, the planners had surveyed Saigon's tallest American-leased buildings and selected thirteen locations for rooftop modification to permit helicopter landings. Since my billet was one of the locations, I acquired still another title -- Marshalling Area Control Officer. If the bussing scheme broke down -- and many of us felt certain that it would -- I would supervise a helicopter landing zone on the flat roof of my billet.

Shortly after my final trip to Hanoi, I attended another planning session for all resident wardens -- this time at the Embassy Mission Warden Office. Once again, I came away from the session feeling uneasy at what appeared to be a terminal case of naivete on the part of Embassy planners. One amendment to the plan for surface movement affected my billet. Since the street outside our gate was too narrow for a bus to turn around, I would now have to assemble my evacuees and march them some 300 meters down the street to the neighboring USAID billet to meet the buses. How I would control this exodus in an environment that might require shotguns and bullhorns wasn't quite clear. The mission warden briefer expressed his hope that the Thieu government would cooperate and declare a twenty-four hour curfew to cover our escape. Once again, such hopes and assumptions seemed out of place to my fellow resident wardens and me. It was difficult to imagine such an easy escape, particularly since it had become public knowledge that the United States was considering the evacuation of as many as 200,000 Vietnamese.

My experience at this second meeting further convinced me that Colonel Madison would have to seize the initiative if we were to succeed in exfiltrating our Vietnamese employees. Once again, I reported to him that the inexperienced Mission Warden
personnel did not seem to appreciate the magnitude of the task at hand. I also briefed the colonel on the covert "Black Flights" which I knew were already underway to evacuate sensitive intelligence personnel. Since our delegation was not a part of the intelligence community, we did not qualify for inclusion in this project, even though our personnel were clearly threatened in the event of a Communist takeover.

Colonel Madison acted promptly. On 18 April, he dispatched a message directly to Dr. Roger Shields, the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense who had cognizance over POW/MIA affairs:

It looks like if we don't take care of our own people nothing will be done. Conversations with intel community -- whose people are no more vulnerable than ours -- indicates they have been taking unilateral action to successfully get their people out. From what we know of the official "plan", extraction of US personnel appears workable. However unannounced extraction of US personnel probably during curfew hours will negate any chance for subsequent Vietnamese extraction. These facts necessitate independent US delegation action. Imperative that we get our people out now. Aside from the moral aspects, from a political standpoint these people might later be useful to the US government if negotiations resume and would certainly be valuable to the other side if they fell into their hands. Have not raised issue with American Embassy here because of their stated views on exfiltration. Need you to convince Sec-State that our people are in special category and should be ordered out now and have him so direct Embassy here...Cannot overstate urgency of situation.

Immediate action is critical. In meantime, we are continuing to work within system here, but are not optimistic that their "plan" will work.

All of us breathed a little easier after the colonel's unhesitant initiative, which we didn't fail to notice involved a fearless end-run around the Embassy. For the moment, there was little more we could do except pray that Dr. Shields would be able to move things at his end. Meanwhile, we endured the daily encounters with our increasingly anxious employees. They had already learned of the departure of some American supervisors who had left Saigon without any attempt to provide for their employees. The collective moodiness and the air of resignation in the office told the story: most of our people expected to wake up one day soon and find that we had left also.

Between 18 and 21 April, I made my final entries into the cassette machine, which had now become my electronic diary. Even though I had intended to continue the project until the evacuation, this became impossible as the pace of events overwhelmed me. The final entries convey some idea of the atmosphere that prevailed as Saigon lived its final days as a free city:

Hanging over everyone's head here is the fact that it's clear that we are about to evacuate. The problem
is, there are still 5,000 of us here. Anyone who knows anything about evacuations under pressure realizes that we are in a deep fix now. I am living out of one suitcase in my apartment. The rest of the place is full of smoke grenades, radios, panel markers, and the other gear one associates with sudden departure. I am supposed to establish a helicopter pad on the roof on the biller. I have also been issued luminous paint and a brush to paint a large "H" on the roof, a wind sock to erect, strobe blinkers to signal the birds at night, emergency actions, flashlights, and first aid equipment. I have all the gear I need, but what I really need is people -- military people to assist. I have nearly 60 American civilians in the building, many of them women, and all tense and frightened. To properly secure this rooftop landing zone, I need a few US Marines. Unfortunately, we cannot make our plan around them because we can't be certain that the Congress will allow this. So, I'm collecting weapons from my residents, and establishing my own arms room as a precaution against the possibility that we will have to go it alone. So far, I've collected two Swedish K submachine guns, one M-16, one 12 gauge shotgun, and six pistols -- all from the mild-mannered men and women in my billet. The Mission Warden people asked us to do without official support if possible as far as weapons, and that turned out to be a blessing. Now I have control of the arsenal that these civilians had collected, which makes me feel more at ease. I shudder to think of what could happen if the situation here becomes unuzzy and some GS-12 hero opens up on the crowd.

It would appear that we're going to implement the plan -- such as it is -- sometime soon. It's possible that we may go within a week or so. We received the word today that we are supposed to send 4,000 of the 5,000 Americans in country out of here in the next five days on Air Force transports. This is the proverbial "easier said than done" task, since so many of the remaining Americans here have Vietnamese families or other interests which tend to make them resist forced departure.

Anyway, my job is to get these 50 Americans and probably several hundred Vietnamese safely out of here when the balloon goes up. We must secure the gate, keep any panicky mobs from getting in, and deport by helicopters from the roof if necessary. Or, ideally, if things remain orderly, we bus them out of here after curfew to the secure area at Tan Son Nhut. I have a lot of reservations about the feasibility of this scheme, and have made them known at the Embassy. The only way that we could evacuate 50,000 or more Vietnamese would be under the protection of some sort of diplomatic settlement. There would have to be a sort of agreement between the South Vietnamese, the North Vietnamese, and the PRG -- something which is simply not in the cards. Right now, God help us if we try to take out the numbers of Vietnamese that have been banded about lately.

On the other hand, I have people who work with me who are as good as dead if we abandon them here. We have started to receive feedback from the so-called "liberated zones," and the word is not good. They have not engaged in any wholesale executions, but they did execute a couple of intelligence officers in Phuoc Long. But they have begun to 'organise the population.' They have issued special ID cards to people who are ethnic northerners and came south in 1974, as well as to people who worked for the Americans. Needless to say, none of this bodes well for our employees or my friends in the intelligence community.

As a result, Ambassador Martin is faced with a simple dilemma here. If we order evacuation and commence the operation because we are afraid that further delay will rule out evacuation, the very order itself and the initiation of even a limited evacuation risks triggering the very conditions we are afraid of in the first place. But if we wait until things have gotten to where it is essential to evacuate, we may not be

* This was a report that was never verified.
able to get away -- as Danang and Nha Trang graphically illustrated. These nightmares spoke quite clearly to all of us. So right now, in the twilight of our involvement here, there are 5,000 Americans in Saigon. And in one of the greatest ironies of the entire war, many people are more frightened of our South Vietnamese ally than they are of the on-rushing NVA.

The order to draw down to 1,000 Americans in the next four or five days is necessary, but difficult to implement. The problem is that a lot of these guys who are here are contractor employees who work for Lear Siegler Industries, PA 5 E, or Northrup -- mostly repairing aircraft for the VNAF. They are ready to go, but they have Vietnamese wives and girlfriends who don't have passports and visas. Therefore, they can't go. For the Americans to leave here in large numbers, somebody has to cut the red tape at the Vietnamese Ministry of Interior. Things just don't move here in the same way as in the States. It's really a mess. The Ministry of the Interior is obstructing most departures, and the reason for this is clear: President Thieu still runs the Vietnamese show.

President Thieu has declared that all is not lost and that the ARVN must fight on "to the last bullet and the last grain of rice." And they have fought well and bravely recently in Xuan Loc. A single ARVN division, the 18th, fought off repeated assaults by three NVA divisions, killing many hundreds of NVA troops. The same thing happened recently in the Delta town of Long An, where the NVA attempted to cut Highway #1. Thieu knows that the moment he agrees to allow an exodus of Americans, his people and the military will interpret this as the sign of final abandonment. That's what just happened in neighboring Cambodia, which fell to the Communists four days after the Americans left. So, until now, there are no signs of cooperation with the US Mission as we attempt to expedite the departures of Americans. Thieu's government is not anxious to see us go, and his immigration people are therefore under instructions to keep the doors closed for Vietnamese citizens to whom many Americans have ties. And you can't blame him too much for his stand, especially since the US has talked about evacuating as many as 100,000 Vietnamese. How would you like to be a soldier in the 18th Division, 25 miles from Saigon, who just went through a five-day battle and saw dozens of your friends killed? Then you hear that the Americans are beginning to evacuate out of Saigon and are bringing selected Vietnamese with them. You look at your American-made rifle and jungle boots, put two and two together, and think, "My God, here is the chance to catch a free ride to the land of milk and honey for you and your family. Meanwhile, the NVA walk into a city that the week before cost them three mailed units.

Meanwhile, the worry continues about our own employees and how we are going to get them out of Saigon. Colonel Hadjian has requested special arrangements from Washington, but we have received no reply as yet. My friends in the intel community are one up on us. Like me, they are under no illusions about the plan. People in the know realize that those organizations which display the most initiative and ingenuity will succeed in saving their people. Those that trust in the plan will most likely fail.

It's for this reason that I have an ugly premonition that the Americans are going to fail miserably in their obligations to their Vietnamese employees. As for me, I just don't want it on my conscience that I didn't do everything possible for my friends and our delegation employees.

In the meantime, I've started to get phone calls and visitors like never before. A Mr. Khai contacted me yesterday. He was an interrogator/translator for the CIA in Hau Nghia when I worked there in '72. He asked me to give him a letter verifying that he worked for the Americans. Today, when I came home, there was a letter from Lt. Thanh at the guard post. He commended the intelligence platoon in Hau Nghia. He wrote: "Dear Captain. If you are able to help
my family and me, please come to Bien Hoa. You know the house. If you can't help us, we are dead for certain." Thank is a North Vietnamese Catholic. I have been in touch with other close friends from the old days, and promised them that I will not leave them behind, but they must maintain contact with me one way or another. Right now, of course, I can't get involved in extracting military officers, but the day will soon come when it no longer matters. It is really shameful to be an American here now, it is an invitation to questions which I can't answer honestly. And so it goes. Every day I come into the office, the girls — with whom I have been close — they get a little cooler, a little less cordial.

It's the 18th of April, and we cancelled the Hanoi flight today. We were suspicious because last week the North Vietnamese captain who accompanied me to Hanoi failed to show at the airport for the return flight — claiming by phone that he had a flat tire. A quick check has revealed that the North Vietnamese have been sending up more men than have returned ever since January, so that their 34-man delegation is now down to about 10 men. Today, the Chief of their delegation, Colonel Tu, was supposed to fly to Hanoi, giving rise to suspicions that he too might take a "safety haven" in Hanoi. We informed the Embassy, and received authorization to cancel the flight, which we did when the C-130 developed "mechanical difficulties."

The military situation deteriorates daily. A week ago, the North Vietnamese had five divisions here in Military Region III, with a total of 19 in the south altogether. We were unable to locate a goodly number of the 19, using all of our by-now-limited intelligence sources. Well, as of today, we picked them up. There are now 11 divisions outside of Saigon, with between four and six more on the way down from the overrun northern half of the country. Hanoi is clearly not leaving many troops off to occupy the newly-conquered areas. They must be letting VC local force units and guerrillas handle these tasks. In any event, it is evident that they are massing around Saigon, and doing it openly. I think it's a not-too-subtle signal to Washington to get out. Today is Friday, and we may be departing here as early as Sunday, or at least we should be gone in a week. The big fear here is that the Congress is going to vote against any more military aid, and being an American in Saigon will be like being a civil rights worker in Mississippi.

I have never been a part of anything as fumbled up as this situation. Here's a good example: Recently it was decided to use eleven pickup points around the city during the evacuation. Someone printed 7,000 copies of a map of Saigon that shows these eleven sites. The idea was to give the maps to Americans. Some (harsh expurgation deleted) down at the Embassy slipped up and put these maps out on the counter of the Consular Section, where they were passed out to Vietnamese. Before anyone caught the mistake, 6,000 copies of the map showing where to go for evacuation had been distributed to the Saigon citizenry. So, if they give the order to evacuate, you can imagine what's going to happen at my billet.

It's Saturday, the 19th of April, and today was a work day. One good reason to go to work is our local national employees. They are afraid to take the weekend off, fearful that they will be out of contact and miss out on the evacuation.

I had a special mission today. Locate a Vietnamese Air Force captain named Dat, and assist him in evacuation. Captain Dat, whose nickname is "Max," was a South Vietnamese pilot in the Hanoi Hilton with our American POWs, where he befriended men who are now in high places in the navy and air force. We received a message from Washington requesting assistance in saving him. I was able to locate him after a little detective work, and explained that I was representing his friends in the American POW community. He showed me a letter
from General Flynn, an Air Force officer who was a POW in Hanoi. The letter was addressed to the Commander of the Vietnamese Air Force, requesting that Pat be allowed to travel to Washington for a convention of former POWs. It was a shrewdly disguised attempt to get him out of the country, and the Vietnamese Air Force didn't buy it. I told the Captain that he must keep in daily contact with me, and be ready to go on a moment's notice. He explained that even though he is single, his family totals 15 persons, counting his parents, brothers and sisters, and their spouses and children. Nothing is simple. I warned him if I gave the word, he had to be ready to come to my billet immediately. If he gets there and there's a mob outside, I won't be able to let him in.

General Smith has closed up the DAO theater and turned it into a processing center. I thought at first that liaison with the Vietnamese government must have finally made headway, for they even have representatives from the Ministry of Interior in the theater. Then it surfaced that the representatives of the ministry did not have the authority to sign exit visas -- that still has to be done downtown. As a result, the entire theater operation is bottlenecked at the end by the need to courier the paperwork downtown for final approval. The result is a sight to behold. There are literally hundreds of people all ready to depart for the States camped all over the real estate outside the theater. Everyone is awaiting the return of their paperwork from the Ministry of the Interior, and patience has worn out long ago. There is a sea of family groups, sitting on their suitcases and grumbling that the US government should be able to do better. Meanwhile, there is strong evidence that the Ministry is not yet ready to cooperate fully. Today at 12:30, they told the DAO couriers who carried the paperwork down there that they were going to take a lunch break. Two hours later, at 2:30, the couriers returned and found the place locked up, closed for the rest of the weekend. Meanwhile, the situation outside the theater gets more and more tense, while out on the nearby flight line, the giant C-141 aircraft are departing nearly empty. And all the while, the NVA get closer and closer. If they unveil their antiaircraft arsenal, the picture could change drastically -- for the worse.

I just hope there are a lot of marines on the scene, because we will need them. Rumors persist of an imminent departure, but nothing is definite. The official community who are in the know are more nervous than ever now that it is clear that the NVA are rushing their divisions into positions around the city. Evacuation planning remains so ad hoc and hurried that I think it's foolish to count on anything. Tomorrow I will go to the office with my ear to the ground. If I am able to confirm that there is an evacuation planned for tomorrow night -- that's rumor #100 -- I'll quietly notify my employees and friends, plus Captain Pat, and hope that they can stay on Tan Son Whut, which would be ideal. The difficulty is, how do they get their families on base?

I am still worried about one final breach of faith here. The idea of Americans first, and then we will do our best to get out as many Vietnamese as possible -- that idea scares me. I'm afraid that if I get all my Americans on the helicopter, someone will say, "That's it. Get the 12 controllers on the next bird." I don't know how I would react if that were to happen, and my people were on the ground.

On 20 April, we received the first good news in some time when Dr. Shields replied to Colonel Madison's request for help. Our "clout" in the Pentagon came through handsomely in the form of a commitment for a dedicated aircraft to exfiltrate our employees and their families to Guam. We quickly
disseminated the good news to our people and cautioned them to keep their special treatment confidential. At the same time, Colonel Madison unveiled still another encouraging development. He had arranged to place all of our employees on temporary duty orders for sixty days. They would thus not leave Vietnam as refugees but as employees of the United States government -- on the payroll. But our message was a combination of good news and bad news. The bad news was that each family group could include only seven persons. This meant that almost every family had to face difficult decisions, and there was almost no time to deliberate. The plane would depart within seventy-two hours.

XVII. "YOU MUST WIN: OTHERWISE DO NOT RETURN"

As tensions escalated in Saigon, the attitude of the US Congress exacerbated our plight. In view of congressional restrictions on the use of military forces in Southeast Asia, we were uncertain until the very end whether Congress would permit the deployment of marines to rescue us from the embittered South Vietnamese and the victorious North Vietnamese. President Ford requested this authority along with emergency military aid for South Vietnam on 9 April, and asked Congress for a decision within ten days. By 28 April, North Vietnamese tanks and artillery ringed Saigon; enemy gunners commenced rocket attacks against the city; and Communist-piloted jet aircraft bombed us as we continued to evacuate as many Vietnamese as possible. Saigon had less than thirty-six hours to live, but the US House of Representatives had not yet found time to consider the President's request. We read in the "Saigon Post" that the House would act on the bill on Tuesday, 29 April. By that time, we would be evacuating under enemy fire (without legal authority). It was hardly
a reassuring performance by our elected representatives.

Now that we had received assurances of a dedicated aircraft from Dr. Shields, our employees grappled with their own dilemma -- with a limit of seven persons per family group, who goes and who stays? One secretary begged for an exception in her case: could she please bring her husband's parents and his seven sisters? Her husband was an only son, and he had refused to leave unless his parents could accompany him. The parents steadfastly refused to leave without their seven daughters. It was painful to explain to her that an exception in her case would force me to make exceptions for others and that such exceptions were impossible due to the capacity of the aircraft. Shortly thereafter, Mr. Ngô announced that he would give up the places for himself and his family to make room for the distressed woman's family. Confronted with this kind of solidarity, I caved in. And so it went. On the day prior to the flight, one of the interpreters sheepishly requested guidance on how to list both of his wives on the manifest. Like many Vietnamese men, he had a "vo lon," (literally, "big wife," his first wife) and a "vo nho" ("small wife," his mistress). I told him that I would forget he had asked such a question and would expect to see his wife and his "sister" on the list.

In the meantime, Congress was still considering President Ford's request for 722 million dollars in emergency aid to the Vietnamese. Few Americans in Saigon held out any hope for passage of the bill, nor did we believe by mid-April that it could have altered the outcome even if it had passed. Yet many Vietnamese clung desperately to the hope that, somehow, the United States would bail them out of their plight. Downtown, a new set of English-language banners proclaimed: "In driving back the Communist massive attack on Xuan Loc and Long An, the ARVN have proven their will to defend their countrymen and their capability to defeat Communist aggressors." On the front page of the "Saigon Post," the government placed a daily message clearly directed at the US Congress: "Military aid will hasten the end of the present conflict. It will boost the position of South Vietnam to reach a political settlement with the other side." In Washington, the prevailing sentiment of Congress was exactly the opposite. More aid would only prolong the inevitable.

Within days of the fall of Cambodia, both the "Saigon Post" and the "Stars and Stripes" reported that the Khmer Rouge were beheading their political opponents. A shudder swept through
Saigon. The South Vietnamese had not forgotten the brutal massacre of several thousand people during the brief Communist occupation of Hue in 1968. Stories circulated about executions in the "liberated zones," accounts that were readily believed by the people of Saigon. "Liberation Radio" protested in vain that "realities in the newly liberated areas have completely exploded the myth about the 'massacres' and 'bloodbath' cooked up by the US and its henchmen." The Communists denounced American warnings about a bloodbath as "an odious slander to cover up the forcible evacuation of the South Vietnamese population and the abduction of Vietnamese children." Radio Hanoi benignly assured those who had cooperated with the Americans that "...they (would) be kindly treated in the spirit of national reconciliation and concord, free from all hostilities and suspicions." But many nervous Saigonese ignored these assurances and preferred to rely instead on the advice of the giant scarlet banner that hung on Le Loi Boulevard: "Don't listen to a thing that the Communists say, but watch very closely everything the Communists do!"

By 20 April, many Saigonese had finally sensed that there was little or no hope for their country. Runs on the banks to withdraw precious savings had commenced several weeks earlier. The black market rate for the US dollar shot up to 3,000 piasters (the official rate was 750 to 1) as people rushed to convert their wealth into hard currency. A headline in the "Stars and Stripes" announced: "EMBASSY BURNS FILES -- U.S. ACCELERATES VIET EVACUATION," and AP and UPI dispatches reported that Senate majority and minority leaders had announced that Congress would not support the Ford request for emergency military aid. My Press Assistant, Terry, tossed these reports into my in-box and then broke into tears. "I hate you Americans for what you have done to my country," she sobbed. "Why didn't you just kill us all quickly and be done with it? I won't go and live in your country -- I couldn't stand it. I'd rather stay here and die!" I tried clumsily to comfort her, with little success. Until the day of the flight to Guam, I feared that she would make good her threat. She had a fiance in Washington, and I couldn't leave her to whatever fate the Communists would reserve for an outspoken anti-Communist who had traveled to Hanoi in the employ of the United States Government. I even considered drugging her if necessary and evacuating her to Guam.

On 21 April, the courageous stand of the ARVN 18th Divi-
sion at Xuan Loc ended in defeat. The superior NVA forces simply flanked the stubborn South Vietnamese, and made Xuan Loc untenable. The road to Saigon was now open. As the 18th Division's survivors struggled to extricate themselves, President Thieu finally resigned. A consummate politician, Thieu delivered a ninety-minute farewell soliloquy over national television during prime time. In an angry and tearful performance, the former army general and leader of his country for almost a decade laid the blame for the military disaster at the feet of the United States:

The big brothers of the aggressors have helped them become increasingly stronger. Despite this, the United States has not made any moves vis a vis the Soviet Union or Red China -- nor has the United States dared to touch the hair on the legs of the North Vietnamese Communists and the Communists in the south...

I have therefore told them: You have asked us to do something that you failed to do with half a million powerful troops and skilled commanders and with nearly $300 billion in expenditures over 6 long years. If I do not say that you were defeated by the Communists in Vietnam, I must modestly say that you did not win either. But you found an honorable way out. And at present, when our army lacks weapons, ammunition, helicopters, aircraft and B-52s, you ask us to do an impossible thing like filling up the ocean with stones. This is like the case in which you give me only $3 and urge me to go by plane, first class; to rent a room in the hotel for $30 per day; to eat four or five slices of beefsteak and to drink seven or eight glasses of wine per day. This is an impossible, absurd thing.

Likewise, you have let our combatants die under the hail of shells. This is an inhumane act by an inhumane ally; refusing to aid an ally and abandoning it is an inhumane act... This is not a fight against the North alone. North Vietnam can do nothing better than South Vietnam, because it can produce no bullets, weapons, rockets, or tanks. So, this small Republic of Vietnam is fighting against the Soviet Union and Red China while its ally fails to protect and aid it...

Toward the end of his speech, Thieu turned his wrath on his American critics:

Some U.S. people and some U.S. Congressmen hold that so long as Mr. Thieu remains in power, there cannot be negotiations, Mr. Thieu is not the man to agree to negotiate; Mr. Thieu is bellicose and refuses to implement the Paris Agreement, so long as Mr. Thieu remains in power, U.S. aid cannot be given in full because so long as he receives U.S. aid, he will continue to fight and will not agree to negotiate.

This is the U.S. scheme to stop providing us with aid and to wash their hands of us. This is a scheme of people who have completely lost their conscience and humanity, or this may be the opinion of people who misunderstand me. Therefore, I resign today.

We'll see whether or not negotiations will be satisfactorily conducted with the agreement of the Communists and South Vietnam when Mr. Thieu is no longer in power. In the affirmative, it is something that our people and the world would gladly welcome. If, with Mr. Thieu's departure, abundant U.S. aid will be provided immediately to help the RVN armed forces conduct the fight, this is something very lucky for us, and my departure is just like a
Finally, in a tearful conclusion, Nguyen van Thieu made this last pledge to his people:

I am resigning but not deserting. From this moment, I place myself at the services of the President, the people, and the Army. ... I will stand shoulder to shoulder with the compatriots and combatants to defend the country.

Four days later, Thieu fled to Taiwan aboard a US Air Force C-118. The following day, one of the officers on the South Vietnamese delegation explained to me that it would have been impossible for the ex-president to take command of a combat division and fight in the defense of the capital. "He would have been killed almost immediately," my friend quipped, "and not by a Communist bullet."

But the theme of Thieu's swan song was a compelling one to many South Vietnamese, who strongly believed that the Americans had made some sort of an agreement with Peking and Moscow and had sold South Vietnam out on the altar of detente. Only among the educated and the officer corps did one find a more balanced view. One colonel told me openly that Thieu's speech had been correct -- as far as it went -- but that the president had only addressed half the reason for the national disaster. This officer argued that acceptance of Thieu's speech as sincere and credible was not possible since he had failed to address his own role in the ongoing tragedy. Thieu had said nothing of his personal responsibility for those features of his regime that had contributed so much to congressional disenchantment with South Vietnam's cause and hastened the termination of essential American military assistance.

We evacuated our Vietnamese employees and their families on 23 April. Since none of them had passports or visas, it was necessary to sneak them out of their own country. To get them onto Tan Son Nhut, we used a closed freezer truck borrowed from one of my enterprising friends in the intelligence community. My friends had already used the drab and nondescript van for more than a week in a series of "black" exfiltrations, and they loaned it to me with the proviso that I return it within three hours. It could be "combat-loaded" with up to fifty people for the short ride past the VNAF security police at the Tan Son Nhut gate. Master Sergeant Bill Herron and I made the clandestine pickup while Colonels Madison and Summers handled the flight line. The plan required our employees and their families to assemble at
a safe house near the base. To avoid attracting attention, we staggered their show times so that only one-third of them appeared at the walled villa at a time.

The first two pickups went smoothly. We crammed fifty frightened and tense people into the truck, locked the rear doors, and drove through the checkpoint without incident. Inside the truck, the mothers muzzled their frightened children to prevent them from crying as we passed the guards. We dropped our cargo with the colonels at "Dodge City," the old MACV personnel center, and then headed back for the final run.

As we loaded the last of our 154 passengers into the truck, a courier arrived from the local police station with instructions for the owner of the villa to report for questioning. The owner, a friend of Bill Herron's, hesitated momentarily and then climbed into the back of the truck with the other Guam-bound passengers. He had entertained no idea of fleeing the country, but the summons to the precinct headquarters quickly changed his mind. Within a few hours, he too was on his way out of Vietnam into permanent exile. The entire operation had gone well. In the space of two hours, we had evacuated all of our employees and eliminated a problem that had been plaguing us ever since the disasters in Danang and Hue.

Before returning the borrowed truck, I made one last pickup at a house in Saigon's Dakao section, where I loaded twenty-seven more passengers and smuggled them to the flight line. This group included several of my closest friends — former counterparts during my tour in Hau Nghia province. Among them were three MSS officers, whose organization was tasked with combatting desertion in the South Vietnamese army. I swallowed hard as they climbed into the dark recesses of the truck. We were still forbidden to exfiltrate military men and I had alerted them for departure only after a difficult inner struggle. Other covert exfiltrations had been underway for several days, and I had finally decided not to risk losing these friends by further delay. I slammed the heavy doors of the truck and padlocked them. By late that day, this group would also be safe on Guam.

In the midst of the confusion of that final week, Colonel Summers drew the honors to make what would certainly be our terminal flight to Hanoi. It proved to be a memorable event. Departure was delayed by the appearance on the flight line of
Brigadier General Phan Hoa Hiep, the Chief of the South Vietnamese Joint Military Commission. Hiep had only recently been appointed Minister of the Interior in the reshuffled Saigon government. At the flight line, the general declared his intention to accompany Colonel Summers to Hanoi. With the new government's blessing, he intended to establish direct contact with North Vietnamese officials to seek a negotiated settlement of the war. After a confused delay of more than two hours, Hiep's initiative collapsed when the Hanoi delegation announced that he would not be received if he flew north.

The Communists had insisted that a political settlement would be possible only if President Thieu resigned. Now that Thieu was gone, they had characteristically upped the ante once again. Hanoi Radio had promptly denounced the new government as "a new political scheme, a Nguyen van Thieu regime without Thieu, with a cabinet of Thieu's henchmen..." Thus, Hanoi's rejection of General Hiep's eleventh hour peace initiative was understandable, particularly when it is viewed in the context of South Vietnam's imminent military collapse. Saigon had nothing left to negotiate.

As Colonel Summers winged his way to Hanoi on 25 April, he had no way of knowing that Hanoi had already decided to reject any form of political settlement. By that time, any sentiments that may have existed in Hanoi for negotiations had taken a back seat to the drive for "total liberation" of the south by the People's Army. In one of the greater ironies of the war, Politburo member Le Due Tho, the co-architect of the cease-fire agreement, had taken a leading role in explaining the attack strategy to the NVA corps commanders on 14 April.

At the NVA's Forward Command Post north of Saigon, Tho addressed the impending battle:

We will attack Saigon when the enemy is disintegrating and in a weak position. However, since that city is his last stronghold, he will strike back because he has no escape route. The enemy has 5 divisions against our 15, excluding the strategic reserve forces. Thus, we cannot fail to win victory.

To impress upon the assembled commanders the determination of Hanoi's leaders to liberate the south promptly, Le Duc Tho revealed that his colleagues in the Politburo had told him: "You must win; otherwise do not return." In Hanoi, Colonel Summers met with Major Huyen, who had reassumed the role of conciliatory host. The major explained apologetically that the usual tour and luncheon was cancelled because Hanoi thought the flight had been postponed. Colonel Summers immediately sensed that his counterpart had serious
business to conduct, and, over tea in a sparsely furnished airport waiting room, the Hanoi officer made his pitch. Colonel Summers recalls that Major Huyen addressed several points during approximately two hours of conversation:

a. The US Delegation, Four Party Joint Military Team must stay in Vietnam to accomplish its humanitarian tasks. He asked me directly if I would return to Hanoi to settle the question of the dead and missing if I were asked to do so. When I replied that I would do what I was ordered to do, he said "you will be asked." As usual, he linked Article 8b (the dead and the missing issue) to Article 21 (reparation aid). In general conversation he mentioned several times the success of the Marshall Plan -- to which I replied that while it was a great success with advanced industrial countries with developed economic infrastructures and a skilled work force, it could not be expected to work in poor underdeveloped societies. On several occasions Major Huyen told me "you have done more than enough... more than enough for the RVN and you have no reason to feel badly."

b. The DAO must go. In a rather circumspect approach, Major Huyen began by saying, in an excited voice, "Why are all the Americans leaving? You know that we have told you that we mean you no harm. It is only the military advisors that must go." I replied that, in all honesty, in my ten months in Vietnam I knew for a fact that there were never more than 50 US military in country. He acknowledged this, but said that the civilians that worked for the military were just as bad as the military. I told him that he must be aware that these people were leaving -- not because of the DRV or PRG but because they had been ordered to leave by the President under congressional pressure. . . .

c. The Embassy must work out its future with the new government. Major Huyen went to great pains to make the point that there was no reason friendly relations could not be quickly established between the US and the DRV. He reminded us that even though Hanoi had been bombed, the people never showed us any discourtesy and were always friendly when we toured the city. Even the POWs had been well treated (I took exception to that statement, but acknowledged that what the DRV considered "good" treatment might be seen as barbaric by Americans). To this general line I replied that much depended on how the war ended. If there was great loss of life, great atrocities, it might take the US as long as it took with China to establish relations. If the US was not humiliated and made to feel guilty, then I saw no reason why normal relations could not be established some time in the future.

d. There will be no "reprisals." Major Huyen asked if I really believed the "bloodbath" stories. I replied that it didn't really matter what I believed ... that the people in Saigon believed it, and their beliefs were reinforced by what was happening in Cambodia -- that if they were not true, the Khmer Rouge was doing the DRV no favor. Major Huyen said "I tell you honestly, there will be no reprisals -- we need these people to rebuild Vietnam." I replied that I had no reason to doubt Major Huyen's sincerity -- but he was a lawyer sitting in Hanoi, a North Vietnamese. I could even believe that the DRV would not permit mass executions. But I found it hard to believe that the PRG would not extract blood debts, and said that I had heard many horror stories about events in Danang and Hue. He said that just was not true. Captured RVN generals had made radio broadcasts and press statements about their good treatment. I replied that no one in Saigon believed such broadcasts. He said that a group of Western observers would shortly tour the "liberated areas" and they would report the truth. I told him that I certainly hoped that such a group represented a broad strata of public opinion, since the Americans that had visited Hanoi had no credibility whatsoever with me. I considered them traitors and would not
believe them if they told me the sun would rise in the east. "Take Jane Fonda, for example," I said, "a great actress but with the political sensitivities of a three year old." He laughed and said, "But, she's a beautiful woman..." I said, "Yes, we can agree that she is a beautiful woman and a great actress, but she is still politically immature -- and not only on Vietnam."...My final words on the "reprisal" issue were that it didn't matter what the DRV said, or what the press or radio said. The people in Saigon were convinced there would be a bloodbath. The only way the DRV could convince them otherwise was by their actions. If there was some kind of interim government, then the people could see for themselves what the policies of the DRV were.

During the return flight to Saigon, Colonel Tu, the Chief of the Hanoi delegation, sought out Colonel Summers and reiterated Major Huyen's main points. By the time the C-130 landed in Saigon, Hanoi had made its point quite clearly. Colonel Summers relayed the main themes of Major Huyen's conversation in his trip report and observed that the discussions in Hanoi seemed to indicate clearly that the North Vietnamese were ready for a negotiated settlement of the war.

Since fifteen NVA divisions were scrambling into jump-off positions for the assault on Saigon at this time, Colonel Summers' experience in Hanoi poses an intriguing question. Were Major Huyen and Colonel Tu unaware of the Politburo's decision to attack Saigon (highly unlikely), or was the US Delegation used as another conduit in an elaborate deception to mislead the Americans about Hanoi's military decision?

At the time of Colonel Summers' trip, Saigon was filled with rumors about the chances for a political settlement. There was open speculation that, if retired General Duong Van ("Big") Minh became president, the Communists might forestall an attack against the capital in favor of a negotiated settlement. General Minh himself apparently believed this speculation, since he was promoting his own candidacy. The subsequent attack on Saigon demonstrated that such hopes had been in vain. Minh became President, but the Communist answer was hardly the offering of an olive branch. One had to wonder at Minh's motives. Why would a man desire to assume the helm of a clearly sinking ship of state? Former Chairman of the Joint General Staff, General Cao Van Vien, provided an answer to this question. General Vien recalls that he met Minh shortly before he became President and that Minh had boasted he used to keep in constant touch with the other side by radio communication. It was a fact he said he could not disclose before for fear of arrest, but it was all right to tell me now. So it was his firm belief that a government with him at the head would be acceptable to the Communists and that they were willing to negotiate with him for a political solution to end the war in South Vietnam... As it turned out, North Vietnam had changed its mind. I understand that by late March, the US Embassy in Saigon had received reports from one of its agents who had succeeded in penetrating COSVN that North Vietnam was inclined toward a military victory rather than a political arrangement.
General Minh waited in vain for a favorable word from the other side but nothing came. The response of the Communists was ominous; they bombed Tan Son Nhut airbase the moment he was sworn in and shelled Saigon barely twelve hours later. General Minh personally admitted he had been duped by the Communists. He had advised his closest aid and his son-in-law, Colonel Nguyen Hong Dai, to leave Vietnam. But the tragic fact was that General Minh was not the only one to be duped. Several other credulous Vietnamese had also been duped and they became stranded in Saigon, unable to leave because it was too late by the time they realized what had happened.

While Colonel Summers debated with Major Huyen in the Hanoi air terminal, Bill Herron and I were immersed in still another smuggling operation. General Smith had secured permission for the Defense Attache Office to begin evacuating the families of our military counterparts. For us, this meant the evacuation of the dependents of the RVN delegation to the Joint Military Commission -- some 1,500 people. It was a considerable undertaking, but one that we could not shirk. Flushed with our success in spirited our employees to Guam, Bill and I attacked our new mission with enthusiasm. It was impossible for us to sneak such a large number of people on base, even if we had access to the freezer truck -- which we didn't. We therefore decided on a different approach. While Bill set out to commandeer a bus somewhere, I explained to Colonel Nghia (Colonel Madison's counterpart) that he and his staff would have to establish covert assembly areas on the base, divide the evacuees into manifested groups of 200, and, somehow, get them to the assembly areas. Bill Herron and I would then shuttle the groups to the American-run evacuation staging area. To this day, we don't know how Colonel Nghia and his men managed, but, in four days, they succeeded in either smuggling or bribing more than 1,000 of their dependents onto the base. Bill Herron managed to expropriate a black bus with embassy plates, which we used to ferry our groups to the evacuation staging area. Colonels Madison and Summers used their influence to pry aircraft tail numbers from the Evacuation Control Center, where the competition was intense for the precious flights. We fared well because we were better organized than the competition. Somehow, with the assistance of our counterparts, we managed to move our groups to the flight line and freedom as fast as we could assemble them. Other organizations were not quite so lucky. The processing center and holding area around the DAO gym and swimming pool became jammed with literally hundreds of people, all camped with their luggage, patiently awaiting the signal to board the shuttle buses for the flight line.
On 27 April, I visited Colonel Nghia in his office and brought him the good news that Colonel Madison had arranged for two more flights. We could now assemble 400 more evacuees and shuttle them to the staging area. As we made our plans for this load, the phone rang. From Colonel Nghia's end of the conversation, I could tell that the caller was either a general or a high-ranking government official.

"No, sir, I'm sorry. I can't do it."

"Yes, I know, sir, but it just isn't possible."

"I'm really sorry, sir, but I don't dare. It's too tightly controlled."

"Yes, sir, goodbye, sir."

Colonel Nghia hung up the phone, his eyes reflecting the heavy sadness in his voice. "The phone has been ringing like this for three days, Dai Uy. That was Ky. He wants me to take some people out on our flights. One day he gives a speech condemning traitors and cowards who leave the country. The next day he is begging me to help evacuate people. He was even crying."

I told the discouraged colonel that other organizations were responsible for people like Air Marshall (and former Vice-President) Ky and reassured him that the most difficult course was the right one in handling access to the scarce evacuation flights. We had already evacuated more than 600 of Colonel Nghia's people, but his own family had not yet departed. The colonel wrung his hands nervously.

"You know, Dai Uy, I couldn't do this if I didn't know deep down in the end, the United States will intervene and save us. Somehow, I just feel that we didn't come this far for it to end like this. I just can't believe that the American Congress will allow Communist troops to march into Saigon."

I was silent for a moment, not wanting to tell him that he had more faith than I, yet determined not to mouth false hopes. In the end, I steered the conversation back to the coordination of the next flight.

During the next twenty-four hours, we managed to evacuate two more planeloads, which brought our total to almost 1,100 souls. Colonel Nghia's family was on the last flight. We learned later that only a handful of the officers and men of the RVN delegation managed to escape and join their families on Guam. The trusting Colonel Nghia was trapped in Saigon.
We knew we were running out of time on 27 April when the North Vietnamese fired four 122 mm rockets into Saigon, killing seven civilians and wounding twenty-four others. They were "political rockets" and conveyed a clear message: the Americans should cease their attempts to evacuate thousands of Vietnamese and go home. By now, enemy radio broadcasts beamed into Saigon called for the "total disbanding of the puppet armed forces" -- Hanoi's name for unconditional surrender.

In a small coffee shop near Tan Son Nhut, several alert ARVN airborne troops noticed an unfamiliar officer wearing their unit insignia. The stranger had a northern accent, which in itself was not unusual -- many of the airborne officers were natives of the north. What did seem strange was the lieutenant's odd unfamiliarity with local prices and customs. The suspicious troopers summoned the military police, who quickly determined that the "lieutenant's" papers were bogus. Under subsequent interrogation, the imposter confessed that he was an NVA artillery forward observer. His orders were to infiltrate the Joint General Staff Compound, steal a tactical radio, and establish contact with his unit. Time was definitely short if the North Vietnamese had begun to position artillery spotters.

Outside the gates of Tan Son Nhut, large crowds had become a daily routine. As soon as President Thieu resigned, the Saigon press had begun to report openly on the ongoing American airlift. Everyone in the growing crowd of anxious Saigonese camped at the gate clutched some form of written proof that they had once worked for the Americans. For the unscrupulous, these desperate people posed an opportunity to make some easy money. They would -- and did -- pay well for a ride past the checkpoint.

Each night after curfew, I made a room-by-room check of my billet. If no one responded to my knock, I used a set of master keys to gain entrance to each apartment. I soon learned not to be surprised at anything I might uncover during my nocturnal rounds. In the four apartments where victims of the C5 crash had lived, their furniture and personal effects lay untouched. Three weeks after the tragic wreck, no one had
bothered to ship their possessions to the States. During one check, I found only fourteen Americans in the sixty apartments. Everyone else had either been declared "non-essential" and had gone home or had begun to sleep in their offices, afraid that they would be trapped in the city if the order to evacuate came at night. That same evening, I counted more than sixty Vietnamese camped in the compound - some in vacant apartments, others in the laundry room. Most of them were either our guards and their families or other employees of the housing office. I didn't have the heart to eject them. In one apartment, I found an attractive Vietnamese woman and her three young sons. I recognized her as the male occupant's "maid." When I asked why she had not gone home, she showed me a pass given to her by her American boss, whom she referred to as her "fiance." "He told me to wait here and he would pick us up and take us to the United States, Dai Uy," she explained.

Only then did I notice their suitcases on the floor near the door. I winced. I had seen her "fiance" that very afternoon as he awaited an evacuation flight. He clearly had no intention of taking her with him. In fact, he had a wife in the States. The next day, I smuggled her and the children into Tan Son Nhut on the floor of my pickup. I later learned that she had managed to link up with one of her unfaithful "fiance's" American employees. The disgusted man had sent her off to the States armed with his former boss' address and phone number in California.

Because of crowd control problems, General Smith had earlier directed the evacuation processing center to move from the DAO theater to the gymnasium-swimming pool area of the old MACV Annex. American marines appeared to assist with crowd control, summoned from the fleet at the General's request. Thereafter, we staged our groups of evacuees by the gym and then bussed them to the flight line when directed by dispatchers who were in constant touch with the Evacuation Control Center. It was an effective system that enabled thousands to depart in an orderly fashion in an environment that could have easily gotten out of control.

On the afternoon of 28 April, I was escorting a group of 200 evacuees when I noticed something strange. As my Vietnamese counterpart read the manifested names, the evacuees were supposed to line up in order. When he read the name, "Sergeant Chung," a family of six stood up to get in line. As the four children's names were read, it was evident from their confused
reaction that they had no idea what their names were supposed to be. I told my assistant, an ARVN captain, that something was clearly wrong. If the six people were indeed the Chung family, then why had all four children moved at once when he read the first name?

The captain took the man aside and learned that he was a Saigon surgeon who had paid five million piasters (about $2,500 at the going rate of exchange) to a captain in the RVN delegation for the six places on our flight. "What about Sergeant Chung and his family?" I asked angrily.

"I don't know, Dai Uy. Maybe they don't want to go. I just don't know."

I was outraged. At that moment, an American civilian drove by in a pickup truck on his way to the main gate. In a fit of temper, I stopped the truck and ordered the doctor and his family to climb into the back. I then instructed the driver to "take them out the gate and leave them there."

"That kind of funny business is one of the main reasons we are here right now," I snapped at my stunned counterpart. The doctor and his family gave me a futile pleading look as the truck pulled away. Within minutes, I regretted my hasty decision, but it was too late. Now I had extra seats on the flight. Then I spotted a young Vietnamese couple hovering on the fringe of my group. The woman carried an infant in one arm, a travel case in the other.

"What are you doing here?" I asked the husband, who wore the longish hair and bell-bottom pants of a student.

"We were supposed to meet a friend who would let us go with his group, Dai Uy," he replied, "but we were late and they have already left. I am a law student and cannot live under the Communists."

"OK, if you want to go, write your names on this list and get in line. But quickly, the buses are about to leave."

As the surprised young student placed the names on the manifest, his wife blinked back tears and then spoke in near-perfect English: "Thank you, Captain. You have saved our lives and the life of our son. We will always think of you as our guardian angel, and we will remember you in our prayers each year at Tet."

Several hours later, we were loading yet another group when four A-37 aircraft suddenly made a low-level pass over the nearby flight line and dropped their ordnance. We were on the receiving end of the first Communist air strike of the Vietnam War. Sharp explosions rocked the ground, and huge columns
of black smoke welled up from the flight line. A moment of panic swept through the crowd of almost 3,000 evacuees gathered at the gymnasium. Using a battery-powered bullhorn, I directed the people to take cover under the swimming pool deck and explained that the attacks were most certainly a "dao chanh," -- a coup d'etat. Within minutes, ARVN and VNAF troops opened fire on the intruders with machine guns and anything else that would shoot, but, by then, the intruders had already fled.

We later learned that the raid had been led by Nguyen Thanh Trung, the VNAF lieutenant who had defected and bombed Independence Palace three weeks earlier. The North Vietnamese had promoted him to captain -- or so we were told by the supercilious Mr. Quang in Hanoi -- and had nicknamed him "the invisible star of the Milky Way," a poetic reference to his alleged long years of covert service to the revolution. Trung had trained several North Vietnamese pilots to fly the relatively simple A-37 "Dragonfly" jets. (The whole story is related in General Dung's memoirs of the campaign.) Their surprise attack destroyed at least ten mothballed VNAF aircraft on the ground and heavily damaged the base operations building. More important, it signalled the beginning of the end of our fixed-wing evacuation efforts. As General Smith recalls:

Subsequent to the bombing the government imposed a 24 hour curfew. Later that evening I learned of the decision to discontinue the flow of C-141 aircraft into Tan Son Nhut. I was told that 60 sorties of C-130 aircraft could be expected for 29 April.1

Some time after midnight, I decided to catch a few hours of sleep. Colonels Madison and Summers were working the crowds, and I hadn't slept at all the night before. With the curfew in force, I couldn't get to my billet, and I used the couch in Colonel Madison's office, keeping my "brick" (radio transceiver) turned on to monitor the evacuation net. I fell asleep instantly, only to be awakened at 4:00 am by a tremendous explosion, followed immediately by yet another -- the second one so close that one of the flags behind the colonel's desk jumped out of its stand. I jumped to my feet as still another explosion rocked the building. From the loud "whoosh" that preceded the detonation, I knew that we were under a rocket attack. Within minutes, at least four rounds impacted on the DAO Compound. Over the radio, I heard a terrified voice, "My God, they've hit the gymnasium!" I rushed out the door to the shelters next to the flagpoles. A squad of marines who had been sleeping
Crater marks the spot where a 122 mm rocket killed two US Marines outside the DAO. The rocket's motor can be seen in the left center of the photo. In the background are the remains of a number of motorcycles destroyed by the blast.

Saigon under fire:
Photo at left shows rocket damage to "Quarters #1," MG Smith's residence.
in the building was holed up in the nearest bunker.

"Are any of you guys medics?" I shouted over the explo­
sions. "Yes, sir, right here," replied a voice in the dark.

"Good. How about hot-footing it over to the gym; they've
 got casualties over there," The marine responded instantly.

More unpleasant news came over the radio. "We've got
two Marines killed in action at Post #4," a tense voice re­
ported. "Request an ambulance to evacuate the bodies."

I arrived at Post #4 as Mission Warden ambulance atten­
dants were loading the remains of the two unfortunate Marines
into their vehicle. One Marine stood guard beside a smoking
hole in the parking lot. The motor of the rocket lay in the
center of the crater. Several nearby Hondas and other ve­
hicles had been destroyed by the explosion. The Marine intro­
duced himself as Sergeant Ken Maloney. "I'm the squad leader,
sir. Judge and McMahon were my men." A huge roar overhead
was followed by an explosion directly across the street in
front of the Tan Son Nhut passenger terminal. Maloney and I
dove down into the ditch. I suggested to the sergeant that,
if he insisted on manning his dead men's post, he should do
it from the prone position -- preferably in the ditch. As I
prepared to leave, a new sound broke the silence -- the telltale
The rustle of incoming artillery fire. A fierce barrage of artillery rounds impacted across the street -- the rounds walking their way in the direction of the flight line. The shells passing over our heads sounded like the roar of an approaching freight train, and those that fell short were so close that the rain of shrapnel plinked against the fence and nearby vehicles. I decided to stay in the ditch and help Sergeant Maloney man the post for a while.

Over the brick, we monitored a report from the gym, where casualties were miraculously light. The rocket that hit the processing center exploded in the unoccupied handball courts. Several rockets impacted in the Command Mess, and Colonels Madison and Cummers awakened the heavy sleepers and readied the main bunker for occupancy. A loud explosion rocked the nearby flight line and a ball of fire momentarily lit up the control tower. Over the air came the voice of an American who was even more exposed than we were. He reported small arms fire on the far side of the runways. Maloney and I exchanged worried glances. The North Vietnamese were knocking at the door. The voice also reported that a US C-130 had sustained a direct hit. My heart sank at the thought of an American crew and a plane load of refugees (luckily, the plane had not yet been loaded and its crew managed to escape).

At my side in the ditch, Maloney suddenly stiffened. Two figures moved stealthily across the open area to our front. We strained to identify them, but we could see only that one of them carried something that looked like a radio with a long antenna. I recalled the captured NVA forward observer.

Since the path of the two men took them within twenty meters of us, I drew my pistol as Maloney clicked off the safety on his M-16. Maloney sprang out of the ditch and accosted the two men with his rifle before they could react. I caught up and discovered two of our local national guards who had been on duty across the street. Both men were deeply frightened. "Ho ban chinh xac lam, Dai Uy 01. Nguy hiem lam," one of them explained ("They're firing very accurately, Captain. It's really dangerous!") Once again, I recalled the captured forward observer. No doubt his friends who didn't get caught were on top of the water towers.

By now, daylight was approaching and Maloney called for another ambulance to complete the job of evacuating the remains of his two men. Fifty meters from the impact point, we stumbled on the barrel and receiver group of a shattered
M-16 rifle, which I gave to a Marine colonel in the building. The colonel asked about the dead Marines, and I told him that the bodies had been taken to the Adventist Hospital, formerly the US Army Third Field Hospital. Later, in a sad but understandable oversight, the Marines realized that, in their haste to evacuate, the two bodies had been left behind.

I finally linked up with Colonels Madison and Summers at the office. Colonel Madison had just received new instructions from General Smith. Washington had decided that our delegation should remain in Saigon following conclusion of the evacuation. Colonel Madison would assemble his men and equipment and proceed to the Embassy, where we would remain as representatives of the US Government after the surrender. Whether the Ambassador would remain was not clear to us. What was clear was that we had been asked to perform a delicate and potentially risky mission.

Across the street, the rockets and artillery rounds continued to impact, and smoke from numerous fires darkened the sky. In the Operations Center, the debate centered around "Option IV," the helicopter extraction of the remaining evacuees from Tan Son Nhut. The assumption was that the runways could no longer be used for additional C-130 flights. One American C-130 was already burning near the flight line.

I was a little surprised when we were directed to remain, even though we had been preparing for such a contingency ever since the North Vietnamese suggested it to Colonel Summers in Hanoi. Since the Communists had indicated clearly that progress on the MIA issue would be linked to American provision of economic aid under Article 21 of the Paris Agreement, Hanoi could easily interpret our continued presence in Saigon as a sign that the United States still viewed the agreement as valid despite the military conquest of South Vietnam. This was a position that I did not believe Washington would adopt. However, Colonel Madison had already outlined the impact of the options to Dr. Shields after the Summers Mission to Hanoi, and we were prepared to remain in Saigon. In our conference room we had already stockpiled emergency rations, medical supplies, and other gear essential to sustain ourselves. We had even broken out a supply of JMT flags, bright orange banners with a black "4" in the center. The flags were supposed to guarantee our diplomatic immunity, but I doubted that anything could protect us from the defeated South Vietnamese except the arrival of the NVA.

By late morning, we were ready to make our move to the
Embassy. Our party now numbered six -- the three officers, MSG Bill Herron, Marine GYSGT Ernie Pace, and Specialist 7 Bill Bell. We had crammed our four black vehicles with equipment and judiciously bedecked them with orange JMT flags. The rocketing had let up, but NVA forward observers were still calling in sporadic fire on the flight line.

We pulled out of the DAO compound around 11:30 am. At the Tan Son Nhut gate, the road was blocked by a crowd of people surging around a stalled vehicle. As I drove my Land Rover into the ditch and bypassed the obstacle without slowing down, I breathed a prayer that Colonel Madison's sedan would not bog down when he attempted the same maneuver. We sped the remaining four miles to the Embassy down streets that were already beginning to fill up with crowds of confused and frightened people. Most of them seemed to be heading in the direction of Tan Son Nhut. The stage was set for the final act of the tragedy.

XIX. "A PRESIDENTIAL ORDER"

A grim-faced Marine security guard admitted our small convoy to the Embassy Compound. Word of the two dead marines at Tan Son Nhut had already reached the Embassy. Outside the gate, a small group of anxious Vietnamese had already gathered. The drone of a chain saw pierced the air as several people felled a large tree in the parking lot. Someone was obviously anticipating use of the lot as a helicopter landing zone. Inside the Embassy building, tight-lipped American civilians were preparing to depart. Many walked around in a daze, their faces registering disbelief at what was happening. In the Political-Military Affairs office, Colonel Madison received new orders. The "highest authority" had decreed that all Americans must evacuate, including our team and the Ambassador himself. There would be no official American presence in Saigon at the conclusion of "Operation Frequent Wind," the code name for the impending evacuation.

We also learned that Washington had finally directed the implementation of "Option IV," a helicopter extraction. The