

## Bitter Memories: The Fall of Saigon, April 1975

*Tom Glenn*

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***I listened to anything I could hear to keep track of what was happening. It was April 1975. I was in Saigon waiting for the North Vietnamese to attack.***

*Day la nhung tin tuc cua  
Tieng Noi Hué Ky phat thanh  
tu thu do Hoa Thinh Don.*

(“Here is the news from the Voice of America, broadcast from the capital, Washington.”) That’s what I heard every day—the Voice of America in Vietnamese. I listened to the BBC, I listened to the American Radio Service, I listened to anything I could hear to keep track of what was happening. It was April 1975. I was in Saigon waiting for the North Vietnamese to attack.

As a speaker of Chinese, French, and Vietnamese, I’d been operating in Vietnam under cover on and off for 13 years. My job was signals intelligence (SIGINT), the intercept and exploitation of the communications of the invading North Vietnamese. I was an employee of the National Security Agency, but my connection with NSA was classified; my name was redacted from unclassified NSA documents. Now, after 40 years, my work has been declassified, and I can tell the story of what happened.

My final stint in ’Nam was in 1974 and 1975. As the head of the covert NSA operation in Saigon, I had two missions: to keep the US ambassador, Graham Martin, abreast of signals intelligence on the North Vietnamese, and to assist the government

of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam) in its own signals intelligence effort. Our suite of offices was in what had been the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) building, by that time named the Defense Attaché Office or DAO building. The edifice was so huge we called it “Pentagon East.” It was located on the military side of Tan Son Nhat airport on the northern edge of Saigon in a compound that housed other buildings, several parking lots, tennis courts, and incinerators. That’s where I was when the North Vietnamese attacked us.

Meanwhile, my wife, our four children, and I lived in an elegant villa on Le van Duyet Street in the residential section of Saigon, near the presidential palace. That’s where they were when a disgruntled South Vietnamese pilot bombed the palace not long before the city fell.

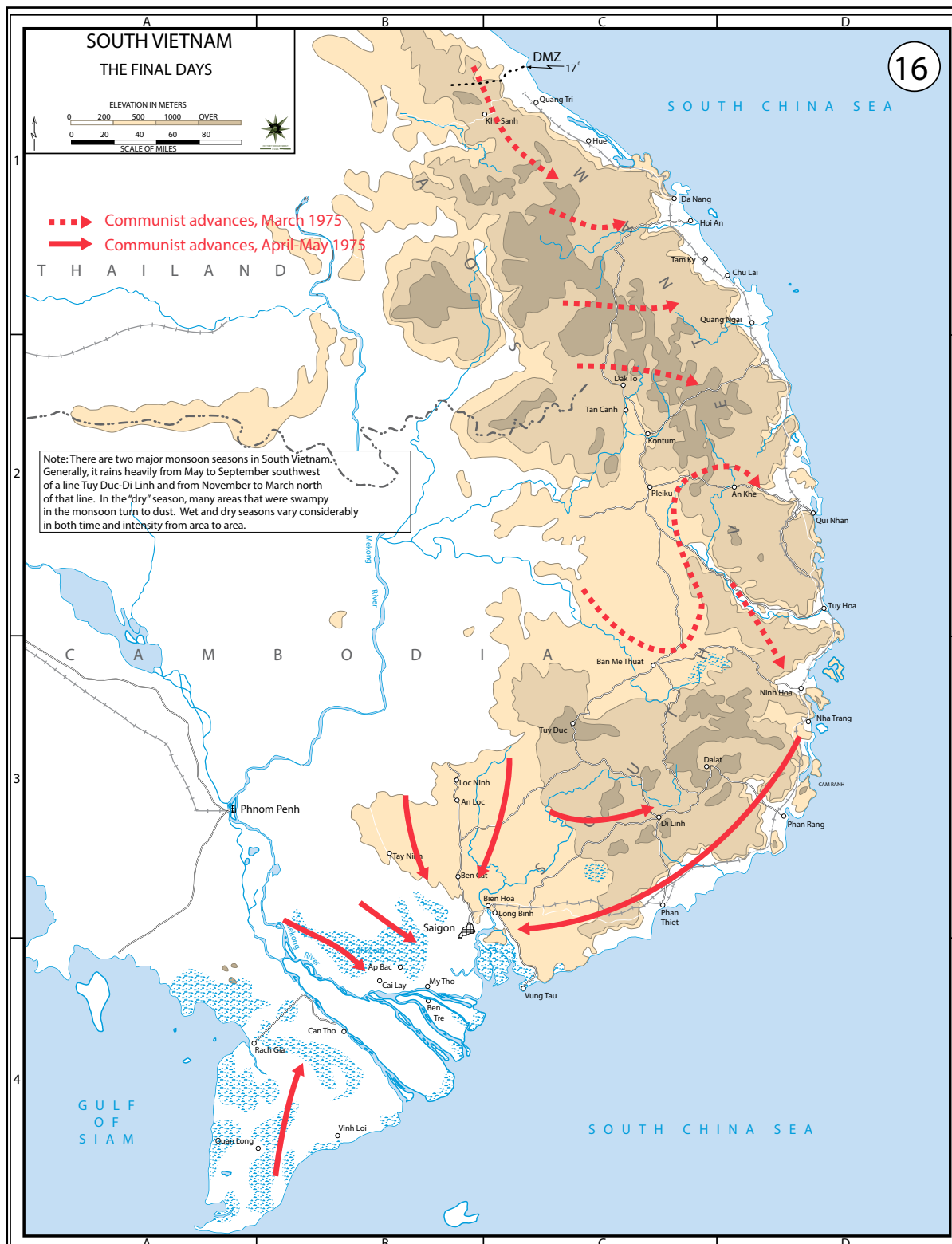


The author with his daughter, Susan, in Saigon during his first tour in 1963. Photo © author.

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Map courtesy of the United States Military Academy History Department (<http://www.westpoint.edu/history/SitePages/Our%20Atlases.aspx>)

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### *Beginning of the End*

For me, the story of the fall of Saigon begins in January, 1975, with the North Vietnamese army's conquest of Phuoc Long Province, some 60 miles north of Saigon. SIGINT revealed that infiltration of men and matériel from North Vietnam had spiked since the autumn of 1974, always an indication that an offensive was coming, and other intelligence indicators of a forthcoming attempt to take Phuoc Long were unmistakable. Nevertheless, the surprise communist victory was an unparalleled blow; it was the first time during the entire war that the North Vietnamese had captured and held a whole province, including the provincial capital.

As I learned later, North Vietnam was testing American resolve: would we Americans keep our solemn pledge to counterstrike if the North Vietnamese violated the cease fire signed in Paris in 1973? The seizure of Phuoc Long was a gross violation. We did nothing.

With a shift in the pit of my stomach, I went over our own evacuation strategy and assured myself that each of my men in the field—at Can Tho in the south, Pleiku in the highlands, and Da Nang in the north—was covered in the escape plans of the State Department consuls in those areas. I confirmed that I could reach each of our reps by both phone *and* radio if things went to pieces suddenly.

By the end of February, it was clear that the focus of the next North Vietnamese campaign was to be in the northern half of the country, the highlands and I Corps. Communist units in both areas were on the move.

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On 9 March, I flew north with my counterpart, a South Vietnamese general, on his C-47 to Phu Bai, near Hué in the far north; to Pleiku in the central highlands; and thence to Ban Me Thuot in the southern reach of the highlands. Our purpose was to visit units under the general's command to prepare them for the coming onslaught. In Pleiku, during a courtesy call with the commander of II Corps, Major General Pham Van Phu, things turned sour. The general I was traveling with and the II Corps intelligence staff chief tried to persuade General Phu that Ban Me Thuot would be the first target of the communist campaign in the highlands. Intercept of North Vietnamese communications made that clear. The II Corps commander was unpersuaded. He doubted the communists were preparing to strike, and if they were, II Corps headquarters would be the logical focus of the offensive. After all, he was the most important man in the highlands, and he was at II Corps headquarters in Pleiku.

My counterpart cut short our trip, and we flew directly, that afternoon, to Ban Me Thuot. The first barrages against Ban Me Thuot had been launched that morning. Not long after we landed, while the general was inspecting his troops, I watched a battle erupt in the valley to the west of the ridge where the airstrip was located. We took off for Saigon just as the runway came under fire.

Ban Me Thuot fell within days, and South Vietnamese President Nguyen van Thieu ordered the evac-

uation of the highlands, starting on 15 March. The result was mass chaos as the military and the civilian population panicked and fled. All major roads to the coast were by then under the control of the North Vietnamese; fleeing military and civilians clogged the only open road, Route 7B, a secondary bypass, barely more than a trail in places, while the North Vietnamese repeatedly attacked them.

Route 7B came to be called "The Trail of Blood and Tears." Something like 18,000 South Vietnamese troops were killed or captured; losses among civilians were over 100,000. The highlands fell within the week.

Almost at once, I Corps, the northern five provinces of South Vietnam, crumbled. Eighty thousand refugees jammed the roads and ports, vainly trying to escape the communists.

With the northern half of the country now captured, communist forces moved south toward Saigon. I knew capitulation was imminent.

To reduce the number of in-country people I was responsible for, I considered sending out some personnel, including my secretary, on the first OPERATION BABYLIFT flight on 4 April. The project, launched by President Ford, was an effort to save as many orphans (mostly Amerasian) as possible because we knew how vicious the North Vietnamese would be to the half-American, half-Vietnamese children. The adults on board the aircraft, all volunteers, would act as caretakers for the children. By the

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grace of God, I decided against sending any of my people on the flight. The C-5A Galaxy transport, the largest plane I've ever seen, was filled with orphans en route to California. It crashed shortly after takeoff, killing 138. Among them were 78 children and 35 DAO folks. Each of us knew somebody who died in the crash. Miraculously, 170 passengers survived, which did not hinder the project's continuation. BABYLIFT would eventually bring some 3,000 children to the United States.

The day after the C-5A disaster, I took my wife to lunch at the American Officers' Club to break the news to her that she and our four children must leave the country immediately. She was incredulous. Just that morning she'd gone to a coffee at the

embassy. Officials in attendance had advised the gathering to disregard news reports; we were all safe and had nothing to fear. Unpersuaded by my urging, she finally agreed to go on three conditions: she could choose the flight date, she and the children could tour the world on the way back to the states, and she could have a new Buick station wagon as soon as she got home.

I disguised my family's departure to look like a vacation in Bangkok (the ambassador forbade evacuations—more about that later) and got tickets for them to fly out on 9 April. On the 8<sup>th</sup>, a renegade South Vietnamese air force pilot bombed the presidential palace, close to our house. My wife was now convinced, but because of the 24-hour curfew imposed by the South Vietnamese government in the wake of the air strike, I had to pull rank to drive my family through the multiple roadblocks in Saigon to the airport at Tan Son Nhat. But at last, I got them all on a plane headed for Bangkok. My relief to have them safe cemented my determination for what I had to do next.

Unsure how long I'd be able to get through the mobs of refugees swarming Saigon, I moved to my office at Tan Son Nhut and stayed there 24 hours a day, sleeping on a cot between the two flags next to my desk—the stars and stripes and the flag of the Republic of Vietnam—a .38 revolver under my pillow.

On 17 April, I was in my office, which was now doubled as my bedroom and stoveless kitchen, read-

ing the latest messages and reports before I burn-bagged them when one of my comms guys came in with a news dispatch—he wanted me to see it right away: Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia, had fallen to the Khmer Rouge, the Cambodian communists. Within days we were reading grisly descriptions of the beheadings of Cambodian officials. I learned what terror tasted like.

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### ***Getting Everybody Out***

Since the middle of March, my principal concern had been seeing to it that none of my people was killed or wounded in the forthcoming attack. I had 43 American men working for me and I was responsible for the safety of their 22 dependents, wives and children, living in Saigon. My men in Da Nang, Can Tho, and Pleiku all managed to reach Saigon after hair-raising escapes and were working in our Tan Son Nhat office. I wanted to get all my people out *now*.

But Ambassador Martin refused to consider evacuations. On the one hand, he wished to avoid doing anything that might stampede the South Vietnamese; on the other, he genuinely believed that the prospect of the communist flag flying over Saigon was unthinkable.

I was stymied.

My state-side boss, General Lew Allen, the director of NSA, ordered me to close down the operation and get everyone out before somebody got killed, but the ambassador wouldn't hear of it. I made him a proposition: if he would let my people go, I would stay in Saigon until the end with a skeleton staff to assure



South Vietnamese soldiers standing guard at the site of the crash of the US C-5A transport on 4 April 1975.  
Photo © Bettman/CORBIS.

that the flow of SIGINT reports for him from NSA would continue. He turned me down.

So I cheated. I sent employees and their families out any way I could think of. Some I had to order out—they were unwilling to leave me behind. Some went on trumped-up early home leave, some on contrived vacations. Others I sent out on phony business travel. One day toward the end, I bought a guy a ticket with my own money and, with no authorization and no orders, I put him on a Pan Am flight to the United States. It was the last Pan Am flight from Saigon.

I knew I'd have to stay until the end. The ambassador wouldn't allow me to go, but, more important, I had to be sure all my subordinates and their families escaped. Besides, some 2,700 South Vietnamese military personnel had worked with NSA for years. I was determined to do everything possible to get them out of the country before the North Vietnamese took Saigon. I knew how cruel the North Vietnamese would be to them if they could get their hands on them.

Since I couldn't leave, I asked for two volunteers to stay with me. I needed a communicator and a communications maintenance technician to keep comms open to the United States. Some men pleaded that they owed it to their wives and children not to risk their lives. I found that eminently reasonable. Then two brave men stepped forward: Bob Hartley, a communicator, and Gary Hickman, a maintenance man. I warned them of the danger and told them that they'd have to keep the equipment going through unforeseen emergencies that might include

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electrical outages and shelling. They understood.

Even today I admire—no, *love*—those two men for their raw courage. They risked their lives because I asked them to.

On 21 April, Xuan Loc, 40 miles northeast of us, fell, ending a heroic defense by the South Vietnamese 18<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. Communist forces encircled us.

I instructed my comms center to reduce to the minimum the number of copies it made of each new incoming message. We bagged documents as soon as we read them and burned them in the incinerator in the DAO parking lot. I turned my full attention to persuading the ambassador that the remaining Americans and the Vietnamese who had worked with us had to leave Saigon before we were captured or killed. To my undying regret, I failed.

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### ***The Last Week***

On 22 April, the US Defense Intelligence Agency estimated that the Republic of Vietnam wouldn't last more than a week. It was comforting to see that the Department of Defense and the Commander-in-Chief Pacific (CINCPAC) harbored no delusions about what was happening in Vietnam, but the ambassador was not in their chain of command. He reported to the secretary of state and the president. Unless they overruled him, he still had the power to keep us

all in Saigon. He convinced them no evacuation was necessary.

Despite the Ambassador's refusal to call for an evacuation, outgoing commercial airlines were choked with passengers, and US Air Force C-130 and C-141 transports daily carted hundreds of Vietnamese and Americans out of the country. The embassy made a point of explaining that their departure was not an evacuation. It was a reduction in force to free up resources to help the Republic of Vietnam.

I didn't know how much longer I'd be able to get out and about—the crowds in the streets were becoming larger and more menacing. Some of the men, in ragged Republic of Vietnam military uniforms, were armed. I knew the danger, but several trips were crucial. I told my Vietnamese driver, who usually ferried me around town, to use his US pass to drive his family onto the military side of Tan Son Nhat in the black sedan assigned to me, a Ford Galaxy with diplomatic plates and American flags, and escape while they still could. Then I took over the sedan. Armed with my .38, I drove it rather than my small Japanese car, foolishly believing that the impressive official vehicle would ward off the massed refugees.

I had it exactly backwards.

The sedan attracted the most desperate of those seeking evacuation. I was mobbed once, but when I bared my teeth and leveled the .38, the crowd pulled back just enough for me to make my way through.

***The ambassador put his arm around my shoulder and guided me to the door. “Young man, when you’re older, you’ll understand these things better.” He showed me out.***

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One trek was to help a Vietnamese family related to our house servants to get into the airbase at Tan Son Nhat so that they could find a way out of the country via a departing US military aircraft. Because South Vietnamese guards at the gates would allow no one to pass without official identification, the family members hid in the trunk and on the floor by the back seat of the sedan, covered with blankets. The guard admitted me without incident. The family managed to get on a C-130 and fly to Guam. Much later, they contacted me in the states to thank me.

I risked another trip to check on a South Vietnamese officer I worked with. I wanted to be sure he and his troops knew where to go when the evacuation order was given, something I couldn’t discuss on an unsecured phone line. Always a model of Asian politeness, he invited me in and served me tea. He told me that his wife, who worked for USAID, had been offered the opportunity to leave the country with her family. That included him. But he wouldn’t go because he was unwilling to abandon his troops—no evacuation order had been issued—and she wouldn’t leave without him. Alarmed, I asked him what he would do if he was still in Saigon when communist tanks rolled through the streets. He told me he couldn’t live under the communists. “I will shoot my three children, then I will shoot my wife, then I will shoot myself.”

He didn’t escape at the end, and I have no doubt that he carried out

his plan; many other South Vietnamese officers did precisely what he described.

That left one more requisite foray. I got through the hordes to the embassy and pleaded with the ambassador to evacuate everybody as soon as possible, citing signals intelligence evidence that an assault was imminent. I repeated what I had already reported to him, that Saigon was surrounded by 16 to 18 North Vietnamese divisions, poised to strike. Communist troops less than two kilometers north of my office at the airport were awaiting the command to attack.

The ambassador put his arm around my shoulder and guided me to the door. “Young man, when you’re older, you’ll understand these things better.” He showed me out.

Frantic, I went down the hall to the office of the CIA chief of station, Tom Polgar. He laughed at my frenzy and showed me a cable to Washington the ambassador had released that morning. It stated that the signals intelligence evidence of a forthcoming assault could be disregarded. It was all due to the communists’ skillful use of “communications deception.” Stunned, I asked Tom what evidence he had of communications deception. He waved my question away and bet me a bottle of champagne, chateau and vintage of my choice, that he and I would both still be in Saigon a year hence, still at our desks, still doing business as usual.

Even though I ran into him months later in the United States, he never made good on that bet.

I finally understood what was going on. The embassy was a victim of what sociologists now call *group-think syndrome*—firm ideology, immune to fact, shared by all members of a coterie. The ambassador, and therefore his subordinates, could not countenance the prospect of a communist South Vietnam and therefore dismissed evidence of the coming disaster. Graham Martin later told Congress he had been advised by the Hungarian member of the International Commission of Control and Supervision, the ICCS, that the North Vietnamese had no intention of conquering Saigon; they wished to form a coalition government with “patriotic forces in the south”—this from a representative of a communist government allied to North Vietnam. *And the ambassador believed him* in the face of overwhelming signals intelligence that the attack was at hand.

On 24 April, the wire services, which we monitored, reported a speech that President Ford had given the previous day at Tulane. He referred to Vietnam as “a war that is finished.” My cynicism overcame my dread. If the war was finished, what was I, a civilian signals intelligence officer and potential prisoner of singular value to the communists—in short, a spy—doing in a combat zone with nothing better than a .38 revolver to defend myself against 18 North Vietnamese divisions?

During the night of 26 April, I was trying unsuccessfully to sleep when a blast threw me from my cot and slammed me to the floor. I ran to the comms center. The guys looked

dazed but everything was working and nobody was hurt. A bulletin arrived within minutes telling us that North Vietnamese sappers had blown up the ammo dump at Bien Hoa, just north of us. That meant, among other things, that panic in the streets would ramp up a couple of notches.

I started doing regular physical recons of the DAO building. Sometimes I took out a load of burn bags to the incinerator in the parking lot and burned them; other times I just wandered around. I wanted to be sure I knew beforehand if the North Vietnamese were going to breach the perimeter fence. As I walked the halls and crisscrossed the compound, I saw brawny, young American men with skinhead haircuts who had appeared out of nowhere. They were dressed in tank tops or tee-shirts, shorts, and tennis shoes. When two or three walked together, they fell into step, as if marching.

*Marines in mufti! I knew all the Marines in country, and I didn't recognize any of these guys. What the hell was going on?*

I found out that night. I was trying to grab a little sleep in my office. The door chime sounded. I grasped my .38 and went to the door. Through the peep hole I saw a middle-aged, red-haired American man in a neon Hawaiian shirt and shorts. He gave me a flat-handed wave and a silly grin. It was Colonel Al Gray, a Marine officer I'd worked with over the years in Vietnam. I'd never before seen Al out of uniform—I didn't think he owned any civies—and I knew he made it an iron-clad rule never to spend more than 24 hours in Saigon—his work was with his troops in the field and he disliked bureaucracy. I lowered

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the .38 and opened the door. "Hi," he said. "Can I come in?"

In my office, I told him everything I knew about the military situation, but he knew more than I did. What he didn't know in detail was what was going on with the friendlies. I told him about the unruly, desperate crowds jamming the streets and now 10 to 15 people deep outside the perimeter fence of our compound and my worry that the fence might not hold. He explained to me that he'd been named the ground security officer—the man in charge—for the evacuation of Saigon once it was ordered.

But the ambassador was doing everything he could to throw roadblocks in Al's way. He wouldn't allow Al's Marines to dress in uniform, fly their own helicopters into the country, or stay overnight. So Al and his troops, in civilian clothes, had to fly in and out each day from the 7th Fleet, cruising in the South China Sea, via Air America slicks, the little Hueys, the UH-1 choppers that could only carry eight to 14 people.

It didn't matter. Ambassador or no ambassador, the Marines had landed. They'd be ready for the evacuation the instant it was ordered.

During my next daylight recon of the compound, I saw 55-gallon drums arrayed along the perimeter fence. I asked one of the buzz cuts why they were there. He said the drums were filled with combustible material, probably gasoline, and wired: if the North Vietnamese penetrated the pe-

rimeter, the barrels would be detonated to wipe them out.

Another tour of the parking lot took me into a surreal world. Marines and civilians were cramming cars, my small white sedan among them, onto the side of the building by driving them into one another so that they formed a compacted mass. That done, the drivers turned their attention to the half-dozen cars still in the parking lot, large black sedans (including mine) and one jeep. These they used as ramming devices, crushing the heap of cars more tightly together. Then they turned the now-mangled sedans on the tennis courts. Again and again, they backed their vehicles to the perimeter and burned rubber to smash into the poles holding the fence around the courts until they tore out of the pavement. Next they used the cars as battering rams, flattening the nets and court fencing against the building. Lastly, they ground the vehicles they were driving into the jumble of mashed automobiles. The area between the fence and the wall of the building was now clear.

It dawned on me what was going on. The small Air America slicks had been able to get into and out of the compound one at a time, without hitting parked cars or the tennis courts, but the much larger Marine CH-53s—each could carry 55 troops loaded for combat—needed more unobstructed space, especially if two or three were in the compound at the same time. One more obstacle to our escape had been removed.





US civilians boarding a Marine Corps CH-53 Sea Stallion helicopter for flight to waiting ships of the 7th Fleet in mid April 1975. Photo © Dirck Halstead/Getty Images.

### ***Last Days***

By 27 April we were, by dint of lying and deception, finally down to just the three of us, my two communicators, Bob and Gary, and I. None of us had slept through the night for longer than we could remember, and our diet was bar snacks we'd scrounged from a hotel before the mobs surrounding us made it impossible to get out. I found out that Vienna sausages were edible cold, straight from the can, and that mustard on pickle relish, if eaten in quantity, could stave off serious hunger. Granted, I developed bowel problems, but my guess was that it was due less to the food than to stress. Coffee we had aplenty—Bob and Gary had seen to that—and I'd made sure I wouldn't run out of cigarettes. From then on it was lots of coffee, chain smoking, almost nothing to eat, and no sleep.

We locked all the rooms in the office suite except the comms center, and I moved my cot and my .38 in there. Bob and Gary and I established

a regimen: one guy took a two-hour rest break while the other two worked.

Then a series of messages I'll never forget flowed in. They asked me to get children out of the country. The requests were from American men who had fathered kids in Vietnam and wanted to save them. I shuddered to think what might happen to Amerasian youngsters when the communists took over. But it was too late. I had no vehicle and couldn't even get out of the compound—surrounded by panicky crowds, anxious for escape—much less to the addresses the children's fathers gave me. To this day, I don't know how the senders managed to get messages to me.

Partly to stay awake, I maintained my schedule of recon runs, checking out the parking lot and the perimeter. I got chummy with the snuffs at the gate closest to the building exit I used. Unlike most of the Marines, these guys were willing to fill me in on any new scuttlebutt. Among

other things, they told me that people outside the fence were tossing babies into the compound, hoping they'd survive and escape the communists. Most of the infants didn't make it over the top of the fence—it was something like two stories high with barbed wire and an outward tilt at the top to prevent scalers. That had to mean many of the babies fell to the ground and were killed.

Not long before sunset on 28 April, I made a head run. The mammoth Pentagon East was in shambles. Light bulbs were burned out, trash and broken furniture littered the halls, and the latrines were filthy and smelled disgusting. I came across men on stepladders running cables through the ceiling. They told me they were wiring the building for complete destruction. "Last man out lights the fuse and runs like hell," they joked.

I went into the men's room. I was standing at the urinal when the wall in front of me lunged toward me as if to swat me down, then slapped back into place. The sound of repeated explosions deafened me and nearly knocked me off my feet. Instead of sensibly taking cover, I left the men's room and went to the closest exit at the end of a hall, unbolted it, and stepped into the shallow area between the western wall of the building and the security fence, a space of maybe eight to 10 feet, now piled high with sandbags.

The first thing I noticed was that the throngs of refugees had dispersed—no one was clamoring outside the barrier—presumably frightened away by the explosions. My ears picked up the whine of turbojets. I shaded my eyes from the setting



sun and spotted five A-37 Dragonfly fighters circling above the Tan Son Nhat runways. They dove, dropped bombs, and pulled up. The resulting concussions sent me tumbling, but I was on my feet and running before the planes went into their next approach. Back in the office, I found out shortly that renegade pilots who had defected to the communists were bombing Tan Son Nhat.

That was the beginning. We were bombarded throughout the night and much of the following day, first rockets, later, beginning around 0430 hours local on 29 April, artillery. One C-130 on the runway next to us was hit before it could airlift out refugees; two others took off empty. Fixed-wing airlifts were at an end. Rounds landed inside the DAO compound; the general's quarters next door were destroyed. Worst of all, two of the Marines I had been talking to were killed. Their names were McMahon and Judge. They were the last American fighting men killed on the ground in Vietnam.

One image I'll never forget: sometime during the night I was on my cot taking my two-hour rest break when the next bombardments started. I sat straight up and watched the room lurch. Bob was typing a message at a machine that rose a foot in the air, then slammed back into place. He never stopped typing.

Just after that, we got word that FREQUENT WIND PHASE IV had been declared. That was the code name for the evacuation. It had finally been ordered.

We gave up trying to rest. The air in the comms center, the only room we were still using, was faintly misty and smelled of smoke, as if a

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gasoline fire was raging nearby. After daylight, I got a call from the Vietnamese officer I'd visited a few days before. He wanted to know where his boss, the general, was. He'd tried to telephone the general but got no answer. I dialed the general's number with the same result. I found out much later that the general had somehow made it from his office to the embassy and got over the wall. He was evacuated safely while his men stayed at their posts awaiting orders from him. They were still there when the North Vietnamese arrived.

Next I telephoned the embassy. "The evacuation is on. *Get us out of here!*"

The lady I talked to was polite, even gracious. She explained to me, as one does to child, that the embassy could do nothing for us—we were too far away, and, although I probably didn't know it, the people in the streets were rioting. Of course I knew it; I could see them. I uttered an unprintable curse. She responded, "You're welcome."

I tracked down Al Gray and asked if he could fit us in with his guys. He reassured me he would.

We got word that armed South Vietnamese air force officers had forced their way into the building and were on the loose, demanding evacuation at gun point. Offices were to be emptied and locked. We were to proceed at once to the evacuation staging area, an office the Marines had secured. We sent our last message announcing we were closing

down. It was a personal message from me to my boss, General Lew Allen, Director of NSA:

1. HAVE JUST RECEIVED WORD TO EVACUATE. AM NOW DESTROYING REMAINING CLASSIFIED MATERIAL. WILL CEASE TRANSMISSIONS IMMEDIATELY AFTER THIS MESSAGE.
2. WE'RE TIRED BUT OTHERWISE ALL RIGHT. LOOKS LIKE THE BATTLE FOR SAIGON IS ON FOR REAL.
3. FROM GLENN: I COMMEND TO YOU MY PEOPLE WHO DESERVE THE BEST NSA CAN GIVE THEM FOR WHAT THEY HAVE BEEN THROUGH BUT ESPECIALLY FOR WHAT THEY HAVE ACHIEVED.

Even though the message was from me to General Allen, I still began the third paragraph with the words "FROM GLENN." I wanted to be sure he knew it was me speaking.

We destroyed out comms gear and crypto and locked the door as we left for the staging area.

The remaining events of 29 April are confused in my memory—I was in such bad shape I was starting to hallucinate. I know that, as the shelling continued, I begged Al Gray to get my two communicators out as soon as possible. I couldn't tolerate the idea that, after all they'd done, they might be hurt, captured, or killed. Sometime in the afternoon, when finally they went out on a whirlybird, my work was done.

***The sea, between and among the ships of the 7th Fleet and to the western horizon as far as I could see, was filled with boats—sampans, junks, fishing vessels, commercial craft, tugs, even what looked like large rowboats, each overloaded with Vietnamese waving and calling to the ships.***

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I recall being locked in a room alone and told to wait until I was called for, trying to stay awake in my chair as the building pitched from artillery hits. I didn't want to board a chopper until I got confirmation that my communicators were safe aboard a ship of the 7th Fleet. And I wanted to get to a telephone to confirm that our Vietnamese counterparts were being evacuated. As far as I knew, they were still at their posts awaiting orders. But there was no telephone in the room, and I couldn't leave because the South Vietnamese air force officers were still on the prowl.

The next thing I remember is being outside.

It was getting dark, and rain was pelting the helicopters in the compound. I protested to Al Gray that I wanted to wait for confirmation that my two communicators were safe, but he ordered me, in unrepeatable language, to get myself on the chopper *now*. I climbed aboard, carrying with me the two flags that had hung in my office—the US stars and stripes and the gold-and-orange national flag of the defunct Republic of Vietnam.

The bird, for some reason, was not a CH-53 but a small Air America slick. As soon as we were airborne, I saw tracers coming at us. We took so many slugs in the fuselage that I thought we were going down, but we made it. All over the city, fires were burning. Once we were “feet wet”—over water—the pilot dropped

us abruptly to an altitude that scared me, just above the water's surface, and my stomach struggled to keep up. It was, he explained to me later, to avoid surface-to-air missiles. All I remember of the flight after that is darkness.

I was conscious when we approached the *USS Oklahoma City*, flagship of the 7th Fleet. The pilot circled four or five times before coming down very slowly on the ship's small, floodlit helopad. He told me subsequently that he, a civilian employee of Air America, had never before landed on a ship.

As we got out of the slick into the lashing rain, flashbulbs went off and someone took my .38. Sailors immediately tipped our Huey over the side and dumped it into the sea. I faintly remember some kind of processing, answering questions and filling out forms, but I was only half there. The next thing I recall clearly is shivering—I was very cold. I was in berth, a sort of canvas hammock, in a room lit only by a red bulb on the bulkhead. I could hear the ship's engine, low and far away, and men above, below, and on all sides of me were sleeping.

I discovered I could walk and found my way to the head where, still shivering, I brushed my teeth, shaved, and showered for the first time in weeks. Somebody directed me to the wardroom where I ate a breakfast and a half, surrounded by the scruffiest mix of Vietnamese and Americans I

had ever seen. Their clothes were torn and filthy. The men were unshaven, the women disheveled. In the midst was a distinguished older gentleman in a ruined suit, but his tie was still knotted at the throat.

When I'd eaten my fill and went on deck, it was daylight—I must have slept a long time. South Vietnamese helicopters flew close to the ship, cut their engines, and dropped into the water. The pilots were rescued and brought aboard as the choppers sank to the bottom.

The sea, between and among the ships of the 7th Fleet and to the western horizon as far as I could see, was filled with boats—sampans, junks, fishing vessels, commercial craft, tugs, even what looked like large rowboats, each overloaded with Vietnamese waving and calling to the ships.

Someone found out I spoke Vietnamese and asked me to broadcast a message on a common frequency tell-



The author with Gen. Al Gray, USMC.  
Undated photo © author.

ing those in the boats that the ships of the 7th Fleet were already jammed to the rafters and couldn't take any more on board. Numb to the implications of what I was saying, I repeated the message four or five times before my voice gave way from coughing and I had to quit. Only later did I understand that many of those boats were so far from shore that they couldn't make it back. Many didn't make it back. The people on them perished at sea.

After circling for days, we finally set sail for Subic Bay in the Philippines. Once there, I booked a flight for Hawaii because I knew I'd be required to brief CINCPAC and his staff about what had happened in Saigon.

When I arrived in Honolulu, still carrying my two flags, an NSA official met me at the airport. Rather than congratulating me for getting out alive or asking if I was all right, he took one look at me and said, "You can't be seen around here looking like *that*." I was still in the clothes I'd been evacuated in and hadn't shaved for days. I knew I'd lost weight and my face was a map of lines. He assigned a subordinate to gussy me up. That guy took me to a barber and a good men's clothing store to get a decent suit to brief the brass at Pearl Harbor.

That briefing didn't go well. I couldn't talk. I was coughing constantly. I couldn't focus my eyes. I was sweating and felt like I was running a fever. When I sat down, I passed out.

I finally admitted to myself that I was suffering from more than exhaustion. For days, as the ships of the 7th Fleet circled, I'd done nothing

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***Any sensible person would have gone to a doctor immediately. But I didn't. I can't tell you how much I yearned to go home. Dressed in my new suit and tie, I booked the earliest flight possible for Baltimore.***

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but sleep. Despite that, I was getting worse. Any sensible person would have gone to a doctor immediately. But I didn't. I can't tell you how much I yearned to go home. Dressed in my new suit and tie, I booked the earliest flight possible for Baltimore. During the stopover between flights in San Francisco, I tried to find a doctor. But a physician's strike was in progress, and no doctor would see me. I flew on to Baltimore. The day after I landed, I found a doctor who diagnosed me with "pneumonia due to sleep deprivation, muscle fatigue, and poor diet." He relished adding that heavy smokers are more susceptible to pneumonia than "normal people."

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### ***Looking Back***

I'd be remiss if I didn't credit Al Gray, a Marine intelligence officer who became a combat commander, with saving my life and the lives of my two communicators. I don't call him Al anymore. That stopped the day he became commandant of the Marine Corps. These days I call him "Sir." General Gray is the finest leader I have ever seen in action and a man I am privileged to know.

None of the 2,700 Vietnamese who worked with us escaped. All were killed or captured by the North

Vietnamese. Many could have been saved but for two factors: (1) The ambassador failed to call for an evacuation—by the time he was countermanded, the North Vietnamese were already in the streets of Saigon. And (2) the general in command of those 2,700 abandoned his troops. They were still awaiting his orders when the North Vietnamese attacked them.

Ambassador Graham Martin's career was effectively ended by the debacle he authored in Saigon. He retired not long after the fall of Vietnam. Bob and Gary, my two communicators, survived and went on with their careers. Bob died about six years ago, but I spoke to Gary a few months ago. He's doing fine.

And me? Besides the pneumonia, I sustained ear damage from the shelling, and I've worn hearing aids ever since. Worst of all, I suffer, even today, from a condition we didn't have a name for back then—post-traumatic



Tom Glenn reflecting on his experience in a recent presentation. Photo © author.

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***Because we were intelligence personnel—spies—torture and long incarceration would have been inevitable.... There, but for the grace of a fallen bridge, went I.***

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stress injury (PTSI). It resulted not just from the fall of Saigon but from earlier experiences in the war. When I got back to the states, my marriage crumbled. The home I yearned for didn't exist, and I was afraid I was going to lose my children—my reason for staying alive. I knew I needed help, but my job was intelligence, and I had top secret codeword-plus intelligence clearances. Had I sought therapy, I would have lost my clearances, and therefore my job. I had to grit my teeth and endure the irrational rages, flashbacks, nightmares, and panic attacks. As it happens, my vocation and my need to help others saved me.

I have always been a writer, and I wrote and wrote and wrote about what had happened. That eventually led to two books, *Friendly Casualties* (2012) and *The Trion Syndrome* (2015). I found out much later that one of the most effective therapies for PTSI is writing down the searing experiences. So to some degree, I healed myself.

Instinctively, I knew I had to help others who were worse off than I was. So I volunteered to care for AIDS patients during the years of that crisis, worked with the homeless, ministered to the dying in the hospice system, and finally worked with sick and dying veterans in the VA hospital in Washington, DC. I learned that when I gave all my attention to suffering people, my unspeakable memories receded into the background.

I still have occasional nightmares, and I can't abide Fourth of July fireworks. But these days, on the whole, I'm rational.

On the positive side, for my work during the fall of Saigon, I was awarded the Civilian Meritorious Medal. It remains my most cherished possession.

And finally, as irony would have it, Bob, Gary, and I were in more danger at the end than we realized. George Veith, author of *Black April*,

told me in January, 2012, what his perusal of newly translated North Vietnamese documents has brought to light: before dawn on the morning of 29 April, as we waited at Tan Son Nhat to be evacuated, the North Vietnamese 28<sup>th</sup> Regiment was en route to attack us. But as the unit's tanks passed over the last bridge into to Saigon before dawn, the bridge collapsed. The regiment was forced to take a detour and didn't arrive at Tan Son Nhat until the morning of 30 April. By then, we were gone.

Had the regiment reached us on schedule, my communicators and I would have been at worst killed, at best taken prisoner. Because we were intelligence personnel—spies—torture and long incarceration would have been inevitable. That was the fate of a CIA employee, James Lewis, captured in mid-April when the coastal city of Phan Rang was overrun.

There, but for the grace of a fallen bridge, went I.

