

An End and a Beginning

SAIGON

"But that's one thing that's good about the United States, you have a revolution each four years."

by **Phil Carroll**

TK, 355th SPS K9; NKP, 56th SPS K9

K9: Charlie 2M45; Tina X768

Vietnam, 1970-1971

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I recently found an old dusty copy of the Oregon State University student magazine that I worked for when I was a student there 1978-81. One of the stories I wrote was about Vietnamese refugees who were students at OSU then, a whole five years after the 1975 fall of Saigon.

Phil Carroll - VSPA Life Member #336

VSPA Previous President

Takhli RTAFB, 355th SPS K-9, Charlie 2M45, 1970

Nakhon Phanom RTAFB, 56th SPS K-9, Tina X768, 1971

Author's Note: *I came back from Thailand in 1971, and was honorably discharged from the Air Force in 1972. Six years later I went to college – a 30-year-old Vietnam Veteran in a crowd of kids, with the GI Bill and three part-time jobs. I wrote this article for the University's student magazine as part of my course of study in Technical Journalism. That whole issue of the magazine looked at the aftermath of the Vietnam War, which had been over for a whole five years. I was assigned a story on Vietnamese refugees on campus, and was fascinated to spend several long sessions with a roomful of Vietnamese students who really opened up to me. I heard some amazing stories and we parted friends. I hope my VSPA Brothers will enjoy this look into the past, a different perspective on what happened 33 years ago.*

Vietnam.

America spent 30 years there, then in the end had to bail out in front of a communist advance that had blasted the defending South Vietnamese forces all the way back to Saigon in less than two months. The final month was the worst in that city, with Americans and Vietnamese alike desperately trying to get out.

The final chaos abruptly ended five years ago this month. Some of the witnesses of that chaos have come halfway around the world. But five years is not long enough to forget what it was like.

"We fled on April 29. We were picked up by the helicopter at the top of the embassy building. We got the passport to flee by the airway, but we came to the airport and it was bombed, so we had to come to the embassy building.

"I was the one who could struggle, and got into the building. I stood at the top of the building, and I could see my family down at the ground. They were waving to me. Saying goodbye."

Son Nguyen tells his story quietly. He sounds sad, and yet proud of what he overcame that day five years ago. Now as a senior at Oregon State University, he is just one of several students here who remember that last month of the American presence in the little country in Southeast Asia called Vietnam.

1 April. Americans in Saigon begin shipping all their valuables home.

5 April. Final official U.S. pullout begins.

6 April. Han Nguyen, now a junior at OSU, and his 11 family members leave their home 200 miles north of Saigon.

"We didn't know anything about when the communists would come and when we should have to leave," Han says. "We waited just till the communists came about two miles from us then we'd run. We had to wait in one southern city about a week, the southern government they cut the road so the communists could not get over."

But the roadblocks aren't just for the communists. The Saigon government is trying to keep the masses of frightened, running people from further swelling the already bloated city of Saigon. So Han and his family move only after midnight.

8 April. Evacuation lines form at the American Embassy.

9 April. Two communist divisions probe Saigon's outer defenses.

13 April. Communists blow up Saigon's ammunition supply. "Then one morning we saw air-plane bombing. Was moving toward us so we had to leave again," Han says. "But then 10 miles the roads were cut again."

19 April. The main force of the largest communist army assembled to date is within 100 miles of Saigon.

21 April. Han and his family arrive in Saigon after a 15-hour trip in a fishing boat. They have been without any reliable information about the course of the war. Communications are nonexistent. "We didn't have a map or anything," says Han, "we were lucky to find the right way. Most of the time was scared...."

"Scared."

Now, the front battle lines are only 26 miles from downtown Saigon.

22 April. Han's family is evacuated from Tân Sơn Nhứt airport. Had their journey taken a day longer, they would have missed their flight. If Han's grandparents hadn't already been in Saigon to complete paperwork, they would have missed their flight. If Han hadn't had an Uncle who was a U.S. citizen, they wouldn't have had a flight to miss.

Not everybody who wants to leave Vietnam is able to do so. Not by the tens of thousands.

24 April. The British Embassy in Saigon closes.

27 April. The first rockets in three and-a-half years hit Saigon.

29 April. Huy Nguyen and his family get on an airplane at the same airport and leave Vietnam. It is easier for them than most because Huy's mother has worked for the U.S. government for 20 years. Huy, now a junior here says, "I think we are very lucky."

A little later that same day, Tuyen Vu, now another OSU junior, tries to leave the same way. "We start in Tân Sơn Nhứt airport and we thought we can leave Vietnam by airplane," Tuyen says. "Got our tickets in hand, but at the last minute they bomb the airport. We waited, and the American helicopters picked us up and we left."

But the American helicopters don't pick everybody up. According to Alan Dawson, a United Press International correspondent in Saigon, the final stage of evacuation was to have taken 10,000 people out of Saigon. But U.S. Ambassador Graham Martin's procrastination in trying to avoid panic kept that number below 6,000.

Thousands of Vietnamese who qualify to go, and uncounted thousands more who want or need to go, are left behind.

In the evening there are numerous fires from the communist shelling. Helicopter gunships and fighter bombers are everywhere. People are everywhere, trying to swarm aboard the helicopters at the airport or climb over the walls at the U.S. Embassy.

The communists are coming and the people want out.

Some people, like Hung Ho, make it to the sea and get lucky enough to find a seaworthy escape craft.

"I left Vietnam on April 29, 1975 by oil boat, civilian, I think," Hung says. "I got to Guam after 23 days. Hungry and everything.

"At first we left Saigon about 200 or so people in the boat. Then we get to Singapore and all the people in the small boats can get on too and so we got about 700 or 800.
"It's a long trip."

But Hung, also a junior at OSU, thinks he was lucky, just to get out.

People who were still there say that night was the quietest, most eerie night of the Saigon war.

30 April. A Wednesday. At 7: 52 a.m. the U.S. ambassador leaves the roof of the embassy building in a helicopter. Within three hours the last of the U.S. Marine Corps guard goes the same way. Left behind are the last two Marine dead, and more than 600 Vietnamese who had been promised a ride.

Thus, America's 30 years in Vietnam are over.

Hoang Hung Huynh heard about it later that day. "I was in the Vietnamese Navy," he says. "The fall of Saigon nobody knew in advance of, we just heard and we left. I didn't have any time, didn't inform my family. I just have my uniform and that's it.

"I was lucky at that time I had a ship. Other people who serve, like on the Mekong River, they just have a river boat, that's all. They don't have a chance. Other my friends who stayed, had to go to, uh, they call them re-education camp. Sort of a prison."

Hoang and his crew took their ship to the U.S. naval base at Subic Bay, Philippines. He was then shipped by the U.S. government to Guam, then Camp Pendleton, California, before coming to Oregon.

Most of the refugees went through one of the U.S. bases in the Philippines, Guam or Wake Island. When they arrived in the United States, most went to one of three processing centers set up at Camp Pendleton, Fort Chaffee, Arkansas and Eglin Air Force Base, Florida.

Some waited only days to join relatives here. Some, without relatives or friends in the United States, waited months for one of a number of charitable organizations to find them a sponsor. The camps were boring, crowded and alien, but there was food and shelter.

Why do people leave their own country for some strange land halfway around the world? A few legitimately feared communist reprisals for their work with the United States.

Many simply did not want to live under a communist government. Some were originally from northern Vietnam, but left when the country was effectively divided by the Geneva Peace Conference in 1954. Like Hung Ho's parents.

"Last time they don't want to be in the communist government, so they move," he says, "so we all know very well what the communists are. Most of the people from north or middle of Vietnam know how the government treats the people, so they don't want to stay with them."

"One thing that makes us experience the communists," says Son Nguyen, "in the south we had terrorists. They kept throwing grenades and bombs at the people on the street. I mean they try to kill the soldiers instead of the civilians, but the grenades don't know who is the soldiers and who is the civilian.

"That's the way we learn about the communists, all of us. I mean we didn't like the way they fought the war, so we have hatred for them."

Hatred? Certainly. And perhaps some fear.

"Right now they are using the southern teenagers to carry the bullets and carry the things for their soldiers to fight," Son says. "They don't give those teenagers the guns to fight, just carry the bullets. And you know how dangerous that is."

Huy Nguyen knows.

"They destroy the generation," he says. "The young people they all throw in the battlefield. They have no future."

"We want to be free," Hung Ho says, "that's all."

But freedom has its costs. Some people think that the 58,000 Americans who died in Vietnam did so in defense of our freedom. Would our newly free immigrants be willing to be drafted into the U.S. armed services, perhaps to be sent to some new Vietnam? As permanent visa holders, awaiting citizenship, they are just as eligible for a new draft as any young American.

Huy says he's willing to do something like that in return for the place he and his family have found here in the United States. So does Son.

"We been here four, five years," Son says, "and we receive all the help, the assistance from American people, if we have a chance to pay it back we are really willing to do it. No problem."
"I thought maybe America can make a mistake," says Tuyen, "like they did to Vietnam, so maybe I won't go. Just like the Americans who came to Vietnam suffered and died over there for no reason, no purpose."

"If I am drafted I fight for this country like if I am Vietnamese citizen I fight for my country, but not fight for Cambodia or Laos or Thailand but fight for my country. If Russia invade right here, I do it."

Hung says he just doesn't know. It is a big question, he has to think about it a lot before he decides. And he probably won't decide until he has to. If he ever has to.

Quietly, Son adds, "I think we have to fight if we want a happy life."

Even at the prospect of fighting for the country that so changed their lives, these students bear no personal grudges.

"Actually, we don't blame American people," Son Nguyen says. "The decisions were made by the government. I think for the congressmen and the president at that time, they are responsible for everything, because they made the decisions. There's nothing the people could have done about it."

"But that's one thing that's good about the United States, you have a revolution each four years." Han Nguyen wonders why the United States didn't help the south like Russia helped the north. He says the United States should have taken the fight to the north. Some South Vietnamese officers advised that, but the United States didn't let them do it.

"A small country never know about politics," Han says. "Just the big countries decide what to do."
"The thing is that America can take over the north just like that, just like that with their power," says Tuyen Vu, "but they don't do that. I guess they just want to keep the war going."

"There was something going on about which we don't have knowledge."

Son suggests that the United States just picked the problem up and tried to solve it, without thinking about it first or trying to understand it.

Han agrees. "America did not understand very well the Asian people and their situation there," he says.

But the situation there is over now, and these students are here, at Oregon State University. For the most, part they've been blending in very well.

They get some help from the Educational Opportunities Program. "Academically and socially they're doing fine, but that doesn't mean they're not under pressure," says Miriam Orzech, director of the program, about these students. "We hear some hair-raising stories, like kids that are told not to write home any more because it's causing their families problems, things like that. You know that's got to cause a lot of pressure. We can help kids communicate about these pressures to their professors, if it becomes necessary."

But Orzech says she has been seeing an improvement. "My impression is that the students' problems that were left over from the war situation are easing," she says.

"They're succeeding."

And that is precisely what they intend to keep on doing. Son, who will graduate this year, plans to follow the money into the computer end of his electrical engineering degree.

"I'm going to go for the job offer, I'm going to go for the best offer I can get," he says.

That's just one of the benefits of the freedom these students have found and learned to love in this country. As they graduate over the next few years, and split up into jobs or more advanced schooling, as they spread out with the job offers or stay in Oregon because they like the climate and people here, they'll be enjoying that freedom.

They've seen our ugly face, too, our discrimination. They've all felt it to some extent, more during summer work as laborers, or less during time with the more educated people they find here at the university. But they get used to it, they say. And it's changing in this country, they say, it's getting better all the time. And they're honest about it.

"It's a common bond," says Hoang. "Like if you go to our country, you face that problem too." They see the unlimited opportunity. They feel the security. They are awed by the value we put on human life. But they met life in a little country called Vietnam about 12,000 miles from here. Would they, given free choice, go back?

"For sure we could come back if we could help build the country with freedom, not communism," Hung says.

Do they think that's likely?

"We don't think. But we hope."

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