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Voices from the Station:
The Evacuation of the US Embassy in Saigon

Center for the Study of Intelligence
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Edited Craig R. Gralley



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Cover photo is the US Embassy in Saigon in 1968. Photo by the US Army in public domain.

Voices from the Station: The Evacuation of the US Embassy in Saigon

Four decades ago, on 30 April 1975, the final chapter of US engagement in the Vietnam conflict came to a close when Saigon fell to the communists of North Vietnam. In recognition of the dedication and perseverance of Agency personnel who stayed to the very end, and for our Vietnamese friends who did not make it out in time, CSI has compiled the statements of key Saigon Station and Agency employees involved in the US Embassy evacuation, including Saigon Chief of Station (COS) Thomas Polgar and his deputy (DCOS) Conrad LaGueux, Directorate of Operations (DO) Far East Division Chief Theodore Shackley, and Chief of Vietnam Operations Joseph Lazarsky.^a Also included is an interview with a longtime DO careerist, who was on the ground during the evacuation.¹ Polgar and LaGueux were among the last to be evacuated on 30 April 1975.

CIA analysts were pessimistic about the likelihood of success in Vietnam—especially during 1964 and 1965, the months leading up to and including the Johnson administration's substantial escalation of US military forces in South Vietnam.^b But fears of spreading communism and concern over the loss of US prestige if South Vietnam fell

We picked up the voice communications . . . the traffic of panic, total panic. . . . It was just a nightmare, including the last 12 hours: destroying not only files but also the cords of the commo gear. . . . I try to erase it from my memory.

I've discussed this with [COS] Tom [Polgar] right [there] at the station. . . . I said, "Your first responsibility is your personnel. This goddamn thing is over except for the crying."

-Joseph Lazarsky

a. Shackley and Lazarsky had served previously as Saigon COS (November 1968 to January 1972) and Saigon DCOS (July 1969 to May 1971), respectively, and were Polgar's and LaGueux's predecessors.

b. (U) Harold Ford, "[\(U\) Why CIA Analysts Were So Doubtful About Vietnam](#)," *Studies in Intelligence* 40, no. 2 (1996).



The embassy evacuation plan included multiple contingencies, such as identifying possible helicopter landing zones at the embassy if the airport was not accessible—which is exactly what happened. Photo by the US Marine Corps in public domain.

to the North provided impetus for both the war's commencement and its continuance. Ultimately, 2 million Americans served and more than 58,000 American lives were lost in the Vietnam conflict.^c

The signing of the Paris Accords in 1973 signaled the end of US military involvement in South Vietnam, and CIA's mission was confined specifically to providing intelligence support.^d Still, South Vietnam and the government of Nguyen Van Thieu remained dependent on US financial and material assistance.

A December 1974 National Intelligence Estimate highlighted an unprecedented buildup of Communist forces in the South.^e The estimate noted that

c. Seventeen of 111 stars on the CIA Wall of Honor are for Agency personnel who lost their lives in the Vietnam conflict.

d. The Paris Peace Accords, signed 27 January 1973, ended direct US military involvement in Vietnam. Although the accord was not ratified by the US Senate, the United States abided by its terms, which called for a cease-fire beginning 28 January 1973, a US military withdrawal within 60 days, negotiations toward a political resolution, and a step-by-step process of reunification through peaceful means.

e. National Intelligence Estimates and estimative products covering virtually the entire period of US engagement in the conflict in Vietnam from 1948 to April 1975 can be found on CIA's public website, www.cia.gov at <http://www.foia.cia.gov/collection/vietnam-collection>.

without an immediate increase in US assistance, South Vietnam's military situation would become parlous, and it also raised the specter of an all-out Communist offensive.^f Weariness and popular disenchantment with the war—as well as the Watergate scandal that weakened the administration of President Richard Nixon—led Congress in the fall of 1974 and again in the spring of 1975 to rebuff the Ford administration's requests for additional military appropriations to support the Thieu government.

Early in March 1975, the North's final offensive began in earnest. Two major military setbacks—the inexplicable, voluntary withdrawal of South Vietnamese forces from the northern panhandle and the Central Highlands and the subsequent fall of Da Nang, South Vietnam's second-largest city—offered an opening and an opportunity for the Commu-

f. (See conclusions to National Intelligence Council, "Short Term Prospects for Vietnam," NIE 53/14.3-2-74, 23 December 1974. It said, "It is even possible—in response to a major opportunity—that the Communists would move to an all-out offensive. . . . But our best judgment now is that they would not do so." South Vietnam's military setbacks in Da Nang and the Central Highlands offered that opportunity.

nists to press the conflict to its logical conclusion: Saigon.^g

Much has been written about the fall of Saigon and the Agency's general role in Vietnam;^h this narrative gives special insight into the story of those who were directly involved in the evacuation of the embassy and Saigon Station, as they describe what happened.

Working the Hill

DO Far East Division Chief Shackley describes the mood in Congress, where the administration was struggling to gain support for funding the government of South Vietnam. Saigon DCOS LaGueux picks up the story, explaining how US Ambassador Graham Martin's extended stay in Washington to lobby lawmakers led him to lose focus on rapidly evolving events taking place in South Vietnam.ⁱ

Shackley: It was clear to us [in spring 1975] that the North Vietnamese were going to win the military struggle unless the US government could get Congress to [change] its views on the critical aspect of funding, and . . . there had to be the will to deploy a very sizeable amount of airpower, without further delay, to stop this advance [of North Vietnamese troops]. [Funding was needed to] stabilize the military situation . . . free up spare parts, free up the flow of gasoline. And that was all money which we did not have appropriated [from Congress].

When I got back here [to the United States], much to our surprise, we met with Kissinger^j and President Ford at Palm Springs. We gave our report [on the situation in South Vietnam] and, I think, to our surprise, we were ordered to go up and make this presentation to Congress. That was something we had never anticipated. We had anticipated that we would come back, having done all this staff work, prepare all the presentations and so forth, and be sitting in the back benches. . . . We had envisioned, I think, that [congressional briefings were] something that was going to be done by Schlesinger, Kissinger, [or] maybe the president. . . . To our surprise, we were thrown into this meat grinder. Well, it was clear to us after the first day that we weren't going anywhere. . . . We did the whole circuit—both houses [and] all the committees; in the course of that we communicated the fact that Saigon did not seem to be a winner [without support].

While I was there, I talked to [COS] Polgar about the need for an evacuation plan and that clearly we needed to start thinning down ourselves—that is, with our staff personnel—and a little bit of that was done. We needed to, clearly, get all the dependents . . . out. We needed to start thinking about getting the Vietnamese out in some form and certainly their families. I think at that time, of course, the [fall of] Da Nang . . . was also very much in my mind.

LaGueux: Ambassador Graham Martin was a very, very engaged [and] dominant, if not domineering, chief of mission. [He was] a man who not only considered himself a commander in the full sense of that term, [including the] military sense, . . . [but was] an active player in the formulation of policy [at the] Washington level. If Martin thought . . . his words weren't getting through, or that Kissinger was having a problem pushing his views into the

g. Thieu resigned 21 April 1975; he and his top government officers fled the country three days later.

h. For example, David Butler, *The Fall of Saigon* (Simon & Schuster, 1985); Theodore Shackley and Rick Finney, *Spymaster: My Life in the CIA* (Potomac Books Inc, May 2005).

i. Graham Martin, a career foreign service officer, succeeded Ellsworth Bunker as Ambassador to South Vietnam in June 1973.

j. At this time, Henry Kissinger was serving simultaneously as US Secretary of State and US National Security Advisor to President Gerald Ford. Kissinger, along with North Vietnamese Politburo member Le Duc Tho, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in December 1973 for negotiating the Paris Peace Accords. Tho rejected the award, claiming that peace had not been restored to Vietnam.

proper policy channels, Martin would . . . get on an airplane and go to Washington for two days, three days, and then come back again.

[Early spring of 1975] he carried the ball [on the funding issue] with Congress on a day-to-day basis. He left [South Vietnam] thinking he'd be back in a week or so. [He] ended up staying for two [or] three months.

DO Case Officer: When [Ambassador Martin] left in early February, the country was in good shape, and the South was winning, and everyone was happy. And when he came back, Da Nang had already fallen and he could never catch up. So, we're at the end of March and he's not letting the State Department destroy any paper. The station pretty much destroyed all their operations stuff, but Saigon was so big for so long that there was a wall—floor to ceiling . . . —of administrative stuff just for Saigon Station . . . and [we] didn't destroy those until just before we left.

LaGueux: Martin [was] an avid reader . . . including all of our products; I mean, this man was insa-

table in terms of reading anything and everything. He said to me dozens of times—if he said it to me once—that it wasn't much use talking to him; his mind was the type that he had to read it. If you said something to him, he would tell you that it might not register for more than a few minutes, but give him something on paper and he will study it and use it.

Now against that background—when [Martin] left on that trip [to Washington] and stayed away for the many weeks that he was away—with the increased pace of activity and the deteriorating activity upon his return, he never caught up. He literally never was able to catch up to the current situation. He tried to read himself back into the situation but never succeeded.

Now the point of that is that from the time [Martin] returned, he remained in a time warp several weeks behind the situation. And while that strategically may not seem important, in a tactical situation it was very important. He never was able to understand that the situation was as serious as it was, to put it bluntly and flatly. I mean you can talk about



In March 1975, Ambassador Martin met with President Ford, Secretary Kissinger, and Army Chief of Staff General Wyand. Official White House photograph by David Hume Kennerly in public domain courtesy of the Gerald R. Ford library.

the fall of Da Nang, but the most critical part, the most critical single episode, was the debacle of the ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) evacuation of the Highlands.^k He never took that aboard. He just didn't seem to focus on it, and to him I'm sure the stories were exaggerated. [He probably thought] it wasn't as serious as people said it was. . . . He would not have denied that it happened, [but] there's always an interpretation of events that makes a difference between reality and something a little less than reality—that's what I'm talking about.

If you're trying to understand the role of the embassy in the final days of . . . Vietnam and the way the evacuation was handled and so on, [Ambassador Martin] was behind the curve. [He] never caught up, to the very end.

Washington and the Field—Talking Past Each Other

Despite Martin's time on the Hill, a divide existed between Washington and the field on the likelihood that Congress would appropriate funds. The field didn't recognize the political dynamics at work in Washington and focused primarily on its belief that the South could and would be saved.

LaGueux: I would say that you had here, in a rapidly deteriorating, rapidly moving situation, the differences that frequently exist between the field and Washington—with each saying that the other doesn't understand what I am talking about. You have that element in a big way. Secondly, I would say that Polgar and the station—myself and others—felt that the situation was not as hopeless as we were beginning to know Washington viewed it to be [that the fall of South Vietnam was inevitable].

k. According to LaGueux, when the ARVN retreated from the Central Highlands, "the forces [were being] decimated; there was nothing left but stragglers." By ARVN estimates, only 20,000 of the 60,000 troops that started from Pleiku reached their final destination on the coast. See LaGueux interview and Stephen T. Hosmer, Konrad Kellen, and Brian M. Jenkins, *The Fall of Vietnam: Statements by Vietnamese Military and Civilian Leaders* (RAND Corporation, 1978), 96.

I don't think we could understand, even with all the contact we had with members of the Congress—and we had quite a lot of [contact] during that period—which advanced our knowledge of just what Washington's situation was. We attended briefing, upon briefing, upon briefing of several of these delegations that came . . . so we were not entirely uneducated or uninformed. On the other hand, I don't think we really appreciated the extent to which the presidency had lost its power, thanks to Watergate.

I don't think we understood quite the predicament that Kissinger—under [Richard] Nixon . . . and under [Gerald] Ford later, with a different slant obviously, politically speaking—had in doing what they might want to do. . . . So with that deficiency and our understanding in the field, I think that . . . we were fighting the problem to some extent in saying, "Look Washington, it doesn't have to be quite what we're making it, what we're headed for here. If you're willing to muster some courage, this can be stopped. I mean this deterioration can be stopped." [However,] I'm not saying that the situation would have been altogether reversed.

We weren't going to win . . . but we could have altered the rapidly deteriorating situation leading to what, after all, has to be called an ignominious defeat on the part of the United States. That was inevitable . . . in my opinion, [but] we could have done that situation very differently.

The Polgar and Martin Relationship: A Commonality of Views

DCOS LaGueux describes Ambassador Martin as a dominant personality and tells how COS Polgar came to agree with the division of labor that the ambassador demanded. This included leaving the timing of embassy evacuation and other planning details in the hands of the ambassador—who didn't tolerate any overt sign of a US intention to abandon South Vietnam.

LaGueux: Martin was a very suspicious fellow, and he's the type of fellow that thrived on keeping you off-balance. He could not deal with anybody without feeling that he had to put them off-balance. . . . He always . . . knew how to manipulate you. . . . He was very good at that. Martin was not a very attractive person.



While officers in Saigon still believed that the South could be saved, President Ford deliberated with Secretary Kissinger and Vice President Rockefeller in the Oval Office over America's next move. Official White House photograph by David Hume Kennerly in public domain courtesy of the Gerald R. Ford library.

If Polgar and I had not been as careful as we were, he would have played one of us against the other, and he did attempt on more than one occasion to do that, particularly with me; but neither Polgar nor I were babes in the woods and, therefore, [it] didn't go very far. But all of that [is] under the heading of Martin's basic inclination to keep people off-balance—[even] people he depended on. He liked to use people, he knew how to use people—but he also knew the dangers of trusting people too much, and that was one of his methods of trying to verify and authenticate what somebody might be doing, [specifically] Tom [Polgar].

[Martin would] criticize Polgar and see what kind of a reaction he would get from me. And I suppose he would do the same thing with Polgar, although the other way was more important because Polgar was the chief and I was the deputy. And . . . he'd also ask me what Polgar [was] up to when he was doing thus and so.

I'm not saying that Polgar and [I] were . . . under his thumb because, in fact, he let us carry out our business pretty much as we needed to, and in him we had an ambassador who was very much on our side. So it was never a matter of defending our activities with him, but anything that went beyond what he knew to be the strict role of CIA was his

business and we then were his agent—we were then his instrumentality.

And he knew we had pretty good contacts here and there. He knew what they were; he insisted on knowing all about them. I think Polgar would [agree that] it was never a difficulty. Except the amount of time it took. . . . It was nothing for us to be—separately, not together—in the ambassador's office an hour, two hours, sometimes longer per day. It's an awful long time out of your schedule to be sitting in the ambassador's office—either listening to him, or talking to him, or some of both, or being in a meeting that he wanted to hold where he wanted us present.

In the end [Martin] had very few friends, and I think that is too bad. Martin's part in the whole Vietnam history—I'm talking now about the very broad history, not CIA's but the broad history—I think will take a lot of time before it gets the proper treatment. Martin above all, above all, was a patriot. Now . . . anyone might have [a] difference [of opinion] as to how his patriotism was expressed and put into effect. Martin was a diplomat who was a pragmatic patriot. His motivation was always 100 percent what is good for the United States, and he never deviated from that. . . . He gets undue criti-

cism—I guess that’s a better way to put it—[he] gets undue criticism for a lot of things.

Events Leading to the Embassy’s Final Evacuation

US plans to evacuate embassy personnel in the closing days suffered a setback at 4:00 a.m. on 29 April 1975, when the main location for departures, Tan Son Nhut International Airport, was attacked by rockets and mortar fire. By 7:00 a.m., US military forces declared the runway unusable for fixed-wing aircraft. Ambassador Martin did not accept this judgment and traveled to the airfield himself to inspect the damage. After consulting with Washington, the ambassador relayed the decision four-and-a-half hours later: the evacuation would proceed using helicopters only.

With the runway at Tan Son Nhut closed, helicopters were called in from the USS Blue Ridge and other ships off the coast, and the evacuation of US embassy personnel shifted to the embassy’s grounds: the courtyard of the ambassador’s residence and the roof of the embassy itself.¹

Helicopters landed and took off throughout the day and night of 29 April. At 4:00 a.m. the next morning, President Ford ordered Ambassador Martin to leave the Saigon Embassy, effectively ending the evacuation.

Polgar: There is a famous interchange [between Kissinger and Martin] in mid-April 1975. In mid-April, Kissinger sends Martin a cable in which he sort of gives a schedule for the evacuation. Martin [responds] and says, “That cable serves no useful purpose except to cover your asses, because you have given evacuation goals but you haven’t given me evacuation means. I understand people’s need to protect their asses, and now I’m the only one whose ass isn’t covered.” Kissinger comes back and says, “You are wrong. My ass isn’t covered either. One

day when all of us are going to hang, I will hang several yards higher than you.” Well, that didn’t turn out to be true.

DO Case Officer: There was an evacuation plan developed by the end of March. Everybody had a number. The Agency and State both had a list. . . . [Before the bombing of Tan Son Nhut,] there were still planes flying [and] they got the families out. . . . The military at Clark Air Base [in the Philippines] was sending in planes and they were taking refugees out at the same time, and that went on for several weeks. And so every day the number of Americans would be reduced.

And the plan was that Clark Field was going to send in either C-130s or -141s to Tan Son Nhut Airport and take everybody out; [it was] very organized [and] peaceful. Everybody had an ID card with a number on it. The week before we evacuated [24 April], they ran a special Air China flight for the Agency’s senior agents—all former [South Vietnamese government] ministers and legislators, all the former presidents, and their families.

But the [United States], I think, had 3,000 or 4,000 [Americans] in country in March. We still had [US] AID and the State Department people out there, plus the orphanage people and the NGOs [nongovernmental organizations] and all of the rest of the Americans. [Continuing the evacuation] was a huge thing.

LaGueux: Tan Son Nhut was being rocketed as the sun began to come up [on 29 April]. I could begin to see the air activity that was going on, with the Communists shooting at anything and everything in the way of airplanes that the ARVN was trying to put up.

I said, “This has got to be it. The next thing, they’re going to be rocketing is the embassy.”

DO Case Officer: You could see the tanks at the edge of town from the roof of some of the buildings.

LaGueux: More and more in my mind I began to think about evacuation problems. I went to Da

¹ The USS *Blue Ridge* was—and remains—the command ship for the US Seventh Fleet.

Nang about the time that the evacuation of Da Nang began and saw how unmanageable a situation could very quickly develop—overwhelming every means of evacuation transportation. And it didn't take much imagination to figure that if that could happen in Da Nang, what the situation in Saigon could potentially be, especially if the Communists wanted to rub our noses in it.

Polgar: [Beginning at] 4:00 a.m., the station [used] emergency alert procedures. The way it worked was you called four people, and they called four people, and then they called four people . . . so I would say that by 7:00 a.m. almost everybody in the station was in the embassy.

[Ambassador Martin] didn't believe [the airport] was unusable. Martin, deep in his heart, still had hope that the C-130, being a very short takeoff plane, could sort of maneuver between the bomb craters. Having been a colonel in the Air Force, I think he fancied himself as an expert.

Shortly before 12:00 p.m., the decision comes: we all [must] go. [Actually] I was told by the ambassador around 11:30 a.m. that the signal from Washington [was] that we were going to phase four [the use of only helicopters for the evacuation].

[Considering the timing of the evacuation and the more than four-hour delay,] the way I felt [about my role in planning the evacuation] is that there was Martin; there was Jacobson,^m who had spent months planning evacuation; [and] there was Rear Admiral Benton,ⁿ who was solely concerned with the logistics of the evacuation. I didn't feel they needed my advice about helicopters . . . or anything else. My job was to read intelligence.

I cannot call Kissinger and say, "Hey, Henry, disregard what the ambassador is telling you." [And] I couldn't [communicate with Shackley or Colby to disagree with Martin] because I had to assume that

Martin and Kissinger were working with more information than I had. It wasn't my role. As we used to say, "It was above my pay grade."

My attitude was that there were people at work there who had more expertise on that particular subject than I did. Also, of course, it was a fundamental policy decision.

LaGueux: It was no longer a matter of designating people to leave as it was designating the people that shouldn't leave, and they were a minimum of people . . . commo, maybe the final security detail for the destruction of papers, and finance people who were still counting money and trying to arrange for the evacuation of monetary assets. It had distressed me that we had let that go to the very end. . . . If I had focused on it earlier, [it] never would have happened because I found out that we still had millions, gold—all kinds of things—until the very last day.

Lazarsky: The only answer I can give you [about why we didn't start the evacuation earlier], and this is quoting Tom Polgar when he got to Manila, he says, "Well, I didn't draw back earlier, Joe, because Graham told me if we, the station, who everyone feels knows what's happening, starts cutting down"—and this is cutting down the last six [or] eight months prior to the final fall—"that it would have created panic among State Department [officials], others, and the Vietnamese." No question about that.

Shackley: We pressed Polgar to do more on evacuation. My guess is that probably started in about the second week of April. The problem that we soon ran into was that Kissinger had sort of given Martin the authority to set the timetable for pulling the plug as to when one would have a formal evacuation, and obviously Martin was hanging in there.

DO Case Officer: [After the artillery and rocket attack at Tan Son Nhut on 29 April,] at daylight . . . everybody started going to the embassy. The plan had been for the Air America helicopters to go to the apartment buildings where the Americans were because they could land on the roof and

m. George Jacobson, Department of State, was an advisor to Ambassador Martin and coordinated the embassy's evacuation.

n. Rear Adm. Hugh Arthur Benton was director of logistics and security for the Pacific commander-in-chief.



The tree pictured here in the embassy courtyard was felled in order to make room for the helicopters to land. Photo by the US Marine Corps in public domain.

they would evacuate them to the airport, where they would get on airplanes or big helicopters or whatever. But that was no longer an option. Most of the helicopters had been blown up on the airport [runway]. The helicopters started coming [from ships offshore], and they picked up the people at the airport and then they started coming to the embassy.

The helicopters that could land on the embassy roof had to be the small helicopters, not the big Hueys. So, somebody had [a] bright idea: they found the embassy fire truck and knocked down a tree that was in the courtyard and dragged it away so that the bigger helicopters could land in the courtyard. As soon as the helicopters started coming to the embassy, the embassy was surrounded [by] Vietnamese. I mean, you've seen some of the pictures. They were trying to crawl over the wall. They had not yet delivered the first batch of combat Marines to the embassy to protect us.

LaGueux: We're talking about big helicopters . . . we're talking about [Marine Corps and Air Force CH-53s] that can hold . . . I don't know . . . a hundred people, and we're operating them every few minutes. I mean, there was one right after the other.

DO Case Officer: And so, all the Agency people were on the wall, pushing people down and pulling

our people in, because . . . to get close enough to get in, they would drive their cars through the crowd and push up to the gate and climb on the roof to get pulled over into the embassy. And that was sort of on three sides of the embassy.

Polgar: It was late in the evening of the 29th when we had the howling mobs outside the fence.^o We had a dangerous situation because we, as Americans, were up on the fence. Anybody could have taken a potshot or overrun us for that matter.

I spotted a [US] colonel outside the fence. . . . I said, [let's] organize a little shock troop, a little human wedge that could bring people up to the fence, . . . then we'll lift you across.

LaGueux: [After the decision to pull out was made, Ambassador Martin] was talking to CINCPAC [commander-in-chief, Pacific] and others . . . trying to get more helicopters, to get more of what he said were Americans that were coming out of the woodwork . . . and indeed he was probably right to some extent. In fact, I know that in a couple of cases . . . some of the expatriates were coming forward on the very last day with their hoard of dependents, saying to the embassy, "Here I am, Joe Brown, and here is my Vietnamese family of 25 people; we want to leave now." There were these people, and they did assemble in the courtyard of the embassy, and as Martin looked out on that courtyard, he wanted to get all of them out, not recognizing at first that it was an impossibility because as soon as you reduce the numbers in the courtyard, more would somehow or another come in.

This gets to be even more hectic during the night [of the 29th] because at that point CINCPAC is saying, "This is your last batch of helicopters that you are going to get."

Martin was buying time, and he made no bones about it; I mean, he was . . . [pushing back the time that the president wanted him to evacuate

^o An estimated 10,000 people gathered outside the US Embassy seeking asylum and safe passage, with 2,500 in the embassy and on the consular compound.



Evacuees boarded military helicopters, such as this one on the USS Midway, in nearly nonstop waves. The goal was to get as many people out as possible. Photo by the US Navy in public domain.

so he could] evacuate as many people as he possibly could. That's not a delay in the evacuation so [much] as it's a delay in the cessation of the evacuation. It's the ending of the evacuation—that's what he delayed. That's what he bought time on.

On the 30th . . . [at] 4:00 [in the morning] or thereabouts, a helicopter comes in, and this time it's got a passenger . . . a Navy officer . . . a lieutenant . . . and we finally get him into the ambassador's office on the third floor. . . . [He said,] "I have a message for Ambassador Martin from the president." And, indeed, he had a personal message from President Ford to Ambassador Martin.

Polgar: [The message] said, "Mr. Ambassador, I'm instructed to put you on the next helicopter, and if you are not going to go willingly, I have to put you on by force."

LaGueux: It was soon thereafter that we left, although I daresay I'm not sure that it [was] on that [next] helicopter.

Those Who Were Left Behind

Some thought there would be an interval to allow US personnel to withdraw, but this was by no means a certainty, and the Vietnamese who arrived at the embassy harbored no similar hope. In this final section, station personnel speculate on the final day of the evacuation and who was left behind.

LaGueux: [The] evacuation mainly of Americans, first and foremost—that's what I was focused on. [The] station and the ambassador had us involved in evacuating some people through Air America facilities; I was involved in making those arrangements. The destruction of documents was pretty well in hand, but it was almost all evacuation.

Shackley: [Colby] took [the position], basically, [that] the Americans could withdraw. [The North would take Saigon,] but Hanoi would leave us this small window of opportunity that we could leave, but be humiliated—leave under humiliating circumstances. But then they wouldn't be stuck with all the prisoners and everything else that went.

*Those left behind in the frantic final withdrawal faced an uncertain fate.
They included groups for whom the Agency bore some responsibility.*

—Roberta S. Knapp, CIA Historian

And, you know, we'd get some Vietnamese out, but it certainly wasn't going to be every Vietnamese who worked for us.

Polgar: I can sum [our evacuation plan] up by telling you that there was never an agreement on how many Vietnamese [we would take]. [We tried to take] as many as we could get hold of. Many of them we couldn't get hold of.

When Tan Son Nhut [was] bombed [on 29 April] . . . the new Minh government declared a total curfew prohibiting all movements on the street. Vietnamese didn't dare move out of their homes, and that made the problem of concentrating people for evacuation earlier just that much more difficult, because the people didn't dare leave their homes.

Did I have a number that I thought could be or should be gotten out? I had no such number . . . no numbers have ever been assembled or agreed to.

DO Case Officer: We did not get out a lot of the agents that the Agency had scattered around the country. One of the agents that actually saved my



In their desperation, local Vietnamese used any means of transportation available to leave the country—including riverboats and barges. Photo by the US Marine Corps in public domain.

husband's life in 1968 when he was hit by a hand-grenade was too far upcountry, and I had no way to get him down.

LaGueux: In terms of the blocks of people that worked for us . . . the radio people were, as far as I know to this day, . . . properly evacuated. They were favorites of the Saigon Base, and I think they saw to it that those people were evacuated.

Now, the translators came under the supervision of the operations staff in the station headquarters, in the station office. I think somebody just walked away from that problem frankly. If I had had a checklist and gone over it, I think it would have been pointed out to me, but frankly in that kind of a fast-moving situation, I didn't have a checklist. That's one group that I never had that much contact with, but I nevertheless knew they existed, and I think we left them behind entirely.

Polgar: Originally we had the so-called KIP [key indigenous personnel] list. We developed a system by which they were issued a special identity card, and that identity card was supposed to be your ticket to get through whatever US defensive lines that may be established in Saigon. That would be your ticket to get on the plane.

But that was completely overtaken by the events, and we had far more people to evacuate than we ever considered likely before. For example, we never considered, say, a clerical employee of the base in MR [military region] 2 as a key indigenous person. . . . And in the Delta, we sort of completely lost control of the situation; the Delta went off on its own. [We] got an awful lot of people out, but [the Delta] wasn't part of the Saigon evacuation process.

[As] many had gotten out as circumstances permitted, and more could have been gotten out if the president hadn't arbitrarily terminated the evacuation process around 4:00 a.m. We had thousands of people in the embassy compound at that time that could not be evacuated.

The barges that were utilized on the afternoon of the 29th were an ad hoc arrangement that nobody had ever planned. It was an act of desperation that miraculously worked. They floated down the Mekong River, and they floated out to sea, and the Navy picked them up. It was not a planned move.

Very shortly after, Brezhnev met with President Ford, and they signed the agreement in Vladivostok, and detente—or reapproachment, whatever you want to call it—was in full swing. In the event, of course, the North Vietnamese did not interfere with the evacuation. They never shot at any of our helicopters. They did not shell Saigon, as some [information] indicated they had an intention of doing. It didn't happen . . . who knows why?

DO Case Officer: They didn't mess with us. They wanted us to leave.

It was still dark when we boarded the helicopter . . . it was probably a half-hour or so before the sun would rise. With the advantage of a little bit of altitude, I could begin to see the sun coming over the horizon. That's how it finally ended.

—Conrad LaGueux

