

30TH ANNIVERSARY END OF VIETNAM WAR

APRIL 30, 2005

WAITING FOR THE SUN



If more people held the humanity of Douglas Adams, we would not be reporting this evening upon the anniversary of the blessed ending of many decades of murderous idiocy. Thirty years ago today the tanks of the Viet Cong rolled into Saigon, not more than a handful of hours after the last helicopters yanked refugees to waiting USN ships of the 7th Fleet, putting an end to a very long nightmare.

In a curious sequel that echoed so much of the quality of that conflict in which so much was not in reality what it was presented as, giving a surreal quality to all events, the most famous image of the fall of Saigon was not as attributed, the evacuation from the Embassy, but another evacuation from the roof of an apartment building. The photo was taken by a foreign correspondent named Hubert Van Es. The evacuation from the embassy is presented below.



The reason for this confusion dovetails into everything that went wrong about that conflict right up until the end, and includes as well stories of incredible valor and sacrifice. Because Vietnam had already been virtually abandoned in terms of serious military support some months previously, an offensive launched by the North pushed further than expected by either side. General Thieu of the South made the decision to reequip and redistribute his forces, effectively removing any single force large enough to resist and organized incursion. When the offensive began, the policy of enclave was developed to disastrous results.

Briefly, the main evacuation point had been designated the main airport, but on April 29, the Viet Cong -- themselves astounded at the lack of serious resistance to their organized advance -- had begun the attack by assaulting the airfield. There, Cpl. Charles McMahon and Lance Cpl. Darwin Judge were killed and earned the dubious distinction of being the last US military casualties, due to hostile fire, of the Vietnam War, although there would still be more unfortunate deaths. The airfield was abandoned and several evac points happened

spontaneously throughout the surrounded city. One of the main points was the Embassy building.

And it almost did not happen.

On board the USS Hancock the admiral in charge terminated all missions going forward as all of the pilots had exceeded their assigned flight hours. A humanitarian commander met privately with the admiral and Operation Frequent Wind was put into motion with pilots doing shifts of some 22 hours, flying through enemy fire to land onto postage-stamp roofs, take on hundreds of refugees, flying off to land on an aircraft carrier or a destroyer deck only to repeat the performance for many more hours.

Meanwhile many other courageous men risked their lives to pull people to safety. Francis Terry McNamara, the US consul general in Can Tho, commandeered a fleet of landing craft to ferry hundreds of people down the Bassac River to safety through blinding rainstorms and enemy fire.

Operation Babylift managed to pull out some 1,500 children despite a tragic incident in which one plane lost over 200 children when forced into a crash landing after taking on enemy fire. This took place in early April.

Edward Daly, president of World Airways, realizing that US Ambassador Martin's delay in executing Operation Frequent Wind was insane in the face of the obvious consequences personally flew a 727 with one other to begin evacuation of besieged Da Nang. The plane took on enemy fire and arrived in damaged condition with the body of a would-be refugee crushed in its wheelwell.

From official NavCon reports we have the following facts and figures: "On April 29 and 30, 662 US military airlift flights took place between Saigon and ships 80 miles away. Ten Air Force HH/CH-53s flew 82 missions, while 61 Marine Corps CH-46s and CH-53s flew 556 sorties. There were 325 support aircraft sorties by Marine, Navy, and USAF aircraft. Air America, the CIA proprietary airline, joined in, having flown 1,000 sorties in the previous month. Air America crews distinguished themselves with a selfless bravery not usually attributed to "mercenaries"."

This is in addition to several thousand undocumented civilian and third-party evacuation efforts.

At 2114 (9:14pm) on 29 April, a CH-46 of HMM-365 crashed into the sea while returning to the USS Hancock; two crewmen were saved, but the pilot and co-pilot were lost, the last real US casualties of the Vietnam War.

On April 30, 1975 at 4:58 a.m., a CH-46 helicopter, call sign "Lady Ace 09," flown by Capt. Jerry Berry, transported Ambassador Martin from the embassy roof to the waiting US fleet. At 7:53 a.m., the last helicopter lifted off, carrying Marine personnel who had been defending the embassy. John Valdez of Grand Forks climbed into a helicopter and lifted off the roof of the embassy. His last view was of a tear gas canister dropping onto the onrushing South Vietnamese who were desperate to go with him.

He was the last Marine out. Less than an hour later, Viet Cong armored divisions secured downtown.

It has been now thirty years since that day when tank 843 smacked through the gates of the presidential palace at 8:43pm.

Today Vietnam is a vibrant and developing society with renewed diplomatic ties to the United States. It has its problems as any country has, but it has a resilient and indomitable people. On our Table we have an item that presents the Memorial Wall in Washington DC and the phrase "My buddies did not end up on this wall flying AWOL in Alabama", and some interpret this to mean that we dislike the current turn of events.

Nothing could be further from the truth. The Vietnamese suffered for a long time a brutal and unnecessary war and America suffered divisions and miseries that persist to the present day. What one did and said during the conflict even became a major issue during the last Presidential election. We excoriate anyone who shirks duty under guise of privilege and special exemption. At any time and any age. And it is clear that Vietnam is now better off without foreign influence as a whole than before.

Obviously any party that loses over a million people fighting a bitter war is not going to handle the defeated with any great tenderness, but the Viets learned from their mistakes over the course of the past thirty years -- unlike some other Administrations we could mention -- and ceased their rough treatment of the South, becoming in the process a solid pillar of stability in a region beset with troubles.

When we talk to people who visit there, we hear the the same comment time after time, "This land will recover because of its people who are indefatigable."

Let the dolphins jump for joy.

(The film version of Douglas' Adam's *Hitch-hiker's Guide to the Universe* opened this month.)

To give you all a sense of Douglas Adam's humanity and to help restore your sense of perspective, we herewith reproduce his scientific graph which conclusively demonstrates why Homo Sapiens is only the second-most -- and potentially third-most -- intelligent species on Earth.

