



The last days of Saigon



1 The final order comes: 'Bye-bye'

Tribune correspondent Ronald Yates was among the last contingent of Americans to escape Saigon as it fell to the Communists. Yates filed this diary of his—and Saigon's—last day of war from the USS Blue Ridge, to which he was evacuated by Marine helicopter. Yates had also been one of the last correspondents out of Phnom Penh before the Cambodian capital fell to insurgent forces in mid-April.

By Ronald Yates
Far East Correspondent



Ronald Yates

ABOARD THE U. S. S. BLUE RIDGE—"That's it, it's 100 per cent evacuation; it's bye-bye everybody," says the voice on a radio tuned to an American embassy frequency.

It is 10:30 a. m. Tuesday in Saigon, six and a half hours after I was rocked from my bed in the 103-year-old Continental Palace Hotel by the explosions of rockets and 130 mm. shells.

Since then, I've been in the corridor outside my room with other reporters waiting out the barrage. I have the same feeling I had three other times in the last eight weeks—the feeling that came before we evacuated Phnom Penh in Cambodia and South Viet Nam's Da Nang and Nha Trang. I have had the feeling for more than 24 hours.

AT 4 A. M. MONDAY, another barrage of rockets hit the city and at 6:30 Monday evening at least two A-37 jets hit Tan Son Nhut airbase with 500- and 700-pound bombs.

After that the whole city seemed to erupt in gunfire as everybody with a weapon apparently fired into the sky. Bullets zipped thru the air, people screamed, others wept, total chaos just hours away.

The shelling remained almost constant, right up to the moment when the embassy's "bye-bye" gets us moving. Bags hastily packed, we half-walk, half-run to our part of Saigon's evacuation pickup point.

Moving along streets partly deserted, thanks to a 24-hour curfew, we see Vietnamese hunkered in the doorways of their houses. Some of them and a few black-uniformed Home Defense soldiers curse us for leaving.

No time to explain, to apologize, to curse them back. I call over my shoulder, "Yes, we are leaving, America is leaving—at last." I don't pause even though I'm hauling a 50-pound suitcase and a 20-pound back pack. Adrenalin surges thru my veins like the Colorado River.

Twenty minutes pass and we find we're at the wrong pickup point. We run on, finally getting to 35 Gia Long St., sweating, panting, happy as hell to be going.

WE STAND IN the scorching sun, waiting for the buses that will carry us to Tan Son Nhut, listening to the whomp! whomp! whomp! of incoming rockets, hearing them hit all over the city.

We see spiraling columns of smoke on almost every point of Saigon's horizon. Then someone says the North Vietnamese have been spotted just two miles from where we stand.

"We aren't gonna make it," says one of us. "We're gonna be put in another Hanoi Hilton; only this time it's gonna be here in Saigon."

Finally, two olive-drab buses pull up, trailing a car with a flashing-blue light. We pile on, lugging our gear.

We drive around the city for an eternity—it's actually an hour but it's endless. Pulling up to Tan Son Nhut, we see artillery craters all around. Rifles crack in the distance. We are moving into what the Marines call a "hot landing zone."

The buses move slowly thru the gate

toward the hulking Defense Attache Office complex known as Pentagon East. It is from here we are to be evacuated.

I look out my window to see a Vietnamese air force C-119 Flying Boxcar take off. I watch it climb slowly into the sky, wondering how near the North Vietnamese have moved their SA-7 ground-to-air missiles.

My answer is a red ball of fire, shooting up from the ground and slamming into the plane. Suddenly it's falling into the city in pieces. Now I'm not sure I want to fly out of Saigon.

As the bus stops at the Dao entrance, a 122 mm. rocket smashes into the ground not far away and a huge cloud of black smoke obliterates the blue sky.

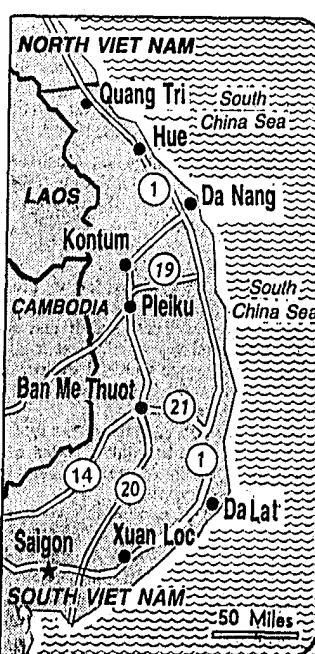
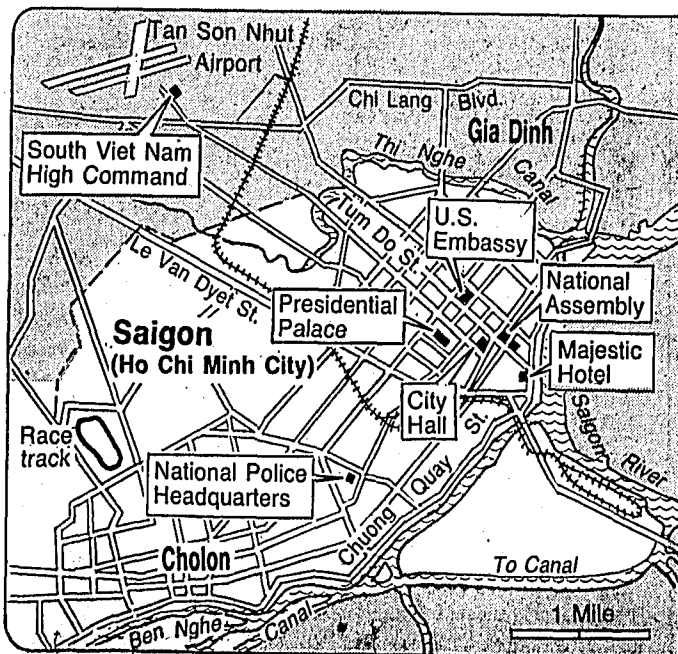
Once inside the building, we are tagged, counted, lined up. The corridors stretch for miles, the line of evacuees fills every foot. Many people are joking now, in that shaky "Whistle a Happy Tune" way that tells how tense it really is.

Outside there now are the sounds of huge H-53 Marine helicopters landing in the parking lot a 100 yards away. We're glad to be going but no one can forget those SA-7 missiles.

Now it's 3:45 p.m. I am about to begin a mad dash for the choppers but a Marine shouts that there can be no luggage. I look at that 50-pound suitcase I've lugged all over Saigon in the last five hours, and think: "Better you than me."

As everyone desperately struggles to extract money and valuables from

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After one of the final rocket attacks on Saigon, South Vietnamese police attempt to clear wreckage from a main street.

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their luggage, the Marine sergeant suddenly yells: "Okay, let's go! Let's move, move, move!"

Sixty-five people run like madmen for the choppers. Marines crouch all around us, their weapons pointed in all directions around the landing zone.

In seconds we lift off, in a few more seconds we are high enough to see the burning wreckage of that C-119. I wait for a ball of fire to come up at us. My

Columnist Vernon Jarrett, James Reston, Jim Squires, and Jerald terHorst and cartoonist Dick Locher have relinquished their space to accommodate this special report on the last days of Saigon.

sweating hands grip the straps on my back pack like vises.

Marines stand ready at the .50 caliber machine guns pointed out the two side windows, but no one fires, even

tho we are taking dozens of rounds of small arms fire from below.

[Even tho the four Marines died during the evacuation, even tho our helicopters were under constant fire, even tho South Vietnamese troops could be seen firing at U.S. Marines, Americans didn't return their shots.

["We don't want to give them the satisfaction of firing back," said a Marine captain. "If the bastards want to shoot down evacuees, then that says a lot for them doesn't it?"]

In 17 minutes we are at the coast, beyond the SA-7s' range. An almost audible sigh of relief goes up.

Later we learn there was a ball of fire coming at us, but the lead chopper had dropped a flare designed to decoy the heat-seeking missile away from us.

As the chopper touches down on the deck of the U.S.S. Denver, a few of us applaud. Others are so relieved they giggle at every word. It is a journey none of us—here or at home—will forget.