

VIETNAM WAR...THE FALL OF SAIGON...US EVACUATION...FINAL ASSAULT AND  
CAPITULATION...APRIL 29 - 30, 1975

The Fall of Saigon, or the Liberation of Saigon, was the capture of Saigon, the capital of South Vietnam, by the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) and the Viet Cong on 30 April 1975. The event marked the end of the Vietnam War and the start of a transition period to the formal reunification of Vietnam into the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

The PAVN, under the command of General Văn Tiến Dũng, began their final attack on Saigon on April 29, 1975, with the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) forces commanded by General Nguyễn Văn Toàn suffering a heavy artillery bombardment. This bombardment at the Tan Son Nhat International Airport killed the last two American servicemen killed in combat in Vietnam, Charles McMahon and Darwin Judge. By the afternoon of the next day, the PAVN had occupied the important points of the city and raised their flag over the South Vietnamese presidential palace. The city was renamed Hồ Chí Minh City, after the late North Vietnamese President Hồ Chí Minh. Before daybreak on April 29, Tan Son Nhat Airport was hit by rockets and heavy artillery. In the initial shelling, C-130E, 72-1297, c/n 4519, of the 314th Tactical Airlift Wing, and flown by a crew from the 374th Tactical Airlift Wing out of Clark Air Base, Philippines, was destroyed by a rocket while taxiing to pick up evacuees. The crew evacuated the burning aircraft on the taxiway and departed the airfield on another C-130 that had previously landed. That C-130, the last to depart South Vietnam is now the gate guardian at the Air Force Base in Jacksonville, Arkansas. The continuing rocket fire and debris on the runways caused General Homer D. Smith, the U.S. defense attaché in Saigon, to advise Ambassador Martin that the runways were unfit for use and that the emergency evacuation of Saigon would need to be completed by helicopter.

OPERATION FREQUENT WIND (originally named Talon Vise)...HELICOPTER EVACUATION OF  
U.S. PERSONNEL AND VIETNAMESE FROM SOUTH VIETNAM

Originally, Ambassador Martin had intended to effect the evacuation by use of fixed-wing aircraft from the base. This plan was altered at a critical time when a South Vietnamese pilot decided to defect, and jettisoned his ordnance along the only runways still in use (which had not yet been destroyed by shelling).

Under pressure from Kissinger, Martin forced Marine guards to take him to Tan Son Nhat in the midst of continued shelling, so he might personally ascertain the situation. After seeing that fixed-wing departures were not an option (a decision Martin did not want to make without firsthand responsibility in case the helicopter lift failed), Martin gave the green light for the helicopter evacuation to begin in earnest.

Reports came in from the outskirts of the city that the PAVN were closing in. At 10:48 a.m., Martin relayed to Kissinger his desire to activate "the FREQUENT WIND" evacuation plan; Kissinger gave the order three minutes later. THE AMERICAN RADIO STATION BEGAN CONTINUOUS PLAYING OF IRVING BERLIN'S "WHITE CHRISTMAS, THE SIGNAL FOR AMERICAN PERSONNEL TO MOVE IMMEDIATELY TO EVACUATION POINTS.

Under this plan, CH-53 and CH-46 helicopters were used to evacuate Americans and friendly Vietnamese to ships, including the Seventh Fleet, in the South China Sea.[ The main evacuation point was the DAO Compound at Tan Son Nhat; buses moved through the city picking up passengers and driving them out to the airport, with the first buses arriving at Tan Son Nhat shortly after noon. The first CH-53 landed at the DAO compound in the afternoon, and by the evening, 395 Americans and more than 4,000 Vietnamese had been evacuated. By 23:00 the U.S. Marines who were providing security

were withdrawing and arranging the demolition of the DAO office, American equipment, files, and cash. Air America UH-1s also participated in the evacuation.

The original evacuation plans had not called for a large-scale helicopter operation at the United States Embassy, Saigon. Helicopters and buses were to shuttle people from the embassy to the DAO Compound. However, in the course of the evacuation it turned out that a few thousand people were stranded at the embassy, including many Vietnamese. Additional Vietnamese civilians gathered outside the embassy and scaled the walls, hoping to claim refugee status. Thunderstorms increased the difficulty of helicopter operations. Nevertheless, the evacuation from the embassy continued more or less unbroken throughout the evening and night.

At 03:45 on the morning of April 30, Kissinger and President Ford ordered Ambassador Martin to evacuate only Americans from that point forward. Reluctantly, Martin announced that only Americans were to be flown out, due to worries that the North Vietnamese would soon take the city and the Ford administration's desire to announce the completion of the American evacuation. Ambassador Martin was ordered by President Ford to board the evacuation helicopter. The call sign of that helicopter was "Lady Ace 09", and the pilot carried direct orders from President Ford for Ambassador Martin to be on board. The pilot, Gerry Berry, had the orders written in grease-pencil on his kneepads. Ambassador Martin's wife, Dorothy, had already been evacuated by previous flights, and left behind her personal suitcase so a South Vietnamese woman might be able to squeeze on board with her.

"Lady Ace 09" from HMM-165 and piloted by Berry, took off at 04:58 - had Martin refused to leave, the Marines had a reserve order to arrest him and carry him away to ensure his safety. The embassy evacuation had flown out 978 Americans and about 1,100 Vietnamese. The Marines who had been securing the embassy followed at dawn, with the last aircraft leaving at 07:53. Vietnamese and South Koreans were left behind in the embassy compound, with an additional crowd gathered outside the walls. The Americans and the refugees they flew out were generally allowed to leave without intervention from either the North or South Vietnamese. Pilots of helicopters heading to Tan Son Nhat were aware that PAVN anti-aircraft guns were tracking them, but they refrained from firing. The Hanoi leadership, reckoning that completion of the evacuation would lessen the risk of American intervention, had instructed Dũng not to target the airlift itself.] Meanwhile, members of the police in Saigon had been promised evacuation in exchange for protecting the American evacuation buses and control of the crowds in the city during the evacuation.

Although this was the end of the American military operation, Vietnamese continued to leave the country by boat and, where possible, by aircraft. Republic of Vietnam Air Force (RVNAF) pilots who had access to helicopters flew them offshore to the American fleet, where they were able to land. Many RVNAF helicopters were dumped into the ocean to make room on the decks for more aircraft. RVNAF fighters and other planes also sought refuge in Thailand while two O-1s landed on an American carrier, USS Midway (CV-41).

Ambassador Martin was flown out to the USS Blue Ridge, where he pleaded for helicopters to return to the embassy compound to pick up the few hundred remaining hopefuls waiting to be evacuated. Although his pleas were overruled by President Ford, Martin was able to convince the Seventh Fleet to remain on station for several days so any locals who could make their way to sea via boat or aircraft might be rescued by the waiting Americans.

FINAL ASSAULT AND CAPITULATION...APRIL 30,1975

In the early hours of April 30, Dung received orders from the Politburo to attack.

He then ordered his field commanders to advance directly to key facilities and strategic points in the city. The first PAVN unit to enter the city was the 324th Division. By daybreak, it was obvious that the ARVN's position was untenable. On the morning of 30 April PAVN sappers attempted to seize the Newport Bridge but were repulsed by the ARVN Airborne. At 09:00 the PAVN tank column approached the bridge and came under fire from ARVN tanks which destroyed the lead T-54, killing the PAVN Battalion commander.

At 10:24, Minh announced an unconditional surrender. He ordered all ARVN troops "to cease hostilities in calm and to stay where they are", while inviting the Provisional Revolutionary Government to engage in "a ceremony of orderly transfer of power so as to avoid any unnecessary bloodshed in the population."

At approximately 10:30 Maj. Pham at Tan Son Nhut heard of the surrender broadcast of President Minh and went to the ARVN Joint General Staff Compound to seek instructions, he called General Minh who told him to prepare to surrender, Pham reportedly told Minh "If Viet Cong tanks are entering Independence Palace we will come down there to rescue you sir." Minh refused Pham's suggestion and Pham then told his men to withdraw from the base gates and at 11:30 the PAVN entered the base. At Newport Bridge the ARVN and PAVN continued to exchange tank and artillery fire until the ARVN commander received President Minh's capitulation order over the radio. While the bridge was rigged with approximately 4000lbs of demolition charges, the ARVN stood down and at 10:30 the PAVN column crossed the bridge.

PAVN T-54/55 tanks under the command of Colonel Bùi Tín burst through the gates of the Independence Palace around noon. They found Minh and 30 of his advisors sitting around the big oval table in the cabinet room, waiting for them. As they entered, Minh said "The revolution is here. You are here." [68] He added, "We have been waiting for you so that we could turn over the government." Tín curtly replied, "There is no question of your transferring power. Your power has crumbled. You cannot give up what you do not have." Later that afternoon, Minh went on the radio for the final time and announced, "I declare [that] the Saigon government is completely dissolved at all levels."

The PAVN had occupied the important points of the city and raised their flag over the South Vietnamese presidential palace. The city was renamed Hồ Chí Minh City, after the late North Vietnamese President Hồ Chí Minh.

THE VIETNAM WAR WAS OVER.