

News-Decoder

May 8, 2018

Vietnam remembered: I was there when Saigon fell

By Bernard Edinger

I covered the fall of Saigon in 1975 when South Vietnam collapsed and North Vietnamese seized the city. Looking back, I ask myself: What was the sense of it all?

This article is part of a [series](#) by our [correspondents](#) and guest writers reflecting on the 1960s — a decade of political and social convulsions around the globe — and on the Vietnam War, a Cold War battleground that left an indelible mark on U.S. politics and an entire generation of Americans who came of age in that era. Our hope is that today's younger generations can learn from their elders' experiences.

Sometime in mid-late April 1975 I mentioned to my bureau chief at the Reuters office in Paris that if needed I would go to the North Vietnamese capital of Hanoi to try to cover the advance of Northern troops then fast bearing down on the South Vietnamese capital of Saigon.

It was clearly the story of the decade. Reuters, which had a bureau in Saigon, was not represented in Hanoi because authorities had not given permission for an office to be opened there.



The author standing on the steps of the former Saigon Opera, which had been converted into the South Vietnamese National Assembly, with one of the first Viet Cong guerrillas to reach central Saigon, 30 April 1975 (photo courtesy of Bernard Edinger)

I thought, “Why not try to ask again now?” since I knew one or two officials at the North Vietnamese diplomatic mission in Paris from covering the Vietnamese peace talks which had been dragging on in the French capital for years.

A few days later, my bureau chief said the Reuters head office in London thanked me for volunteering, but they had another idea in mind: It was pretty clear that Saigon was going to fall imminently.

Our international staff in Saigon was made up of two Britons and an American. Neither Britain nor the United States had diplomatic relations with Hanoi. I was a French national, and France did have ties with Hanoi.

Would I go to Saigon if we evacuated our staffers who were there now?

It didn't sound at all like a fun assignment

The Cambodian capital Pnom Penh had just fallen to the Khmer Rouge Communist guerrillas, and all foreign journalists had taken refuge in the French Embassy there. I could seek refuge in the French consulate in Saigon if the situation deteriorated to the point where foreigners were threatened.

“Ahh...” I had not expected that one. Less than two years earlier, I had covered the October 1973 Arab-Israeli war from the Israeli side, going to the Golan Heights front against Syria, the Sinai desert and subsequently the Egyptian mainland, where Israeli forces fought the Egyptian army.

War is no joke, but being on the losing side can be nightmarish as I had seen from the bodies and burning vehicles littering battlefields where journalists were allowed.

Saigon itself was starting to be shelled, and news reports spoke of a start of anarchy in the city. I had visited Saigon a year before as a tourist and had noted that the local population was often terrified by units of its own army and their lawless ways. Not to mention the “Saigon cowboys,” local hoodlums who preyed on foreigners.

An AFP journalist who had been brought in for questioning by local police had been shot dead in a police compound.

It didn't sound at all like a fun assignment in case the country fell apart.

“But the editor-in-chief would consider it as personal favor if you accepted the assignment,” I was told. Well, the then-editor-in-chief was (and still is) a friend, and I accepted, likening myself to a sacrificial lamb.

“What do you think will happen?”

I flew from an unseasonably cold Paris in the last week of April and changed planes in humid Bangkok. I was already totally exhausted when I boarded the Air Vietnam flight to Saigon on Monday April 28, two days before the Communists took the city.

Aboard the nearly empty Boeing 727, there were just four passengers — a Belgian television crew and myself.

After take-off, the South Vietnamese pilot came to speak to us. Airline captains are meant to be reassuring, but not this one.

“What do you think will happen? Will the communists take over? What will they do to us?” he asked. We had absolutely no answers and were pretty worried ourselves.

It was to be the last civilian flight into Saigon before the city fell. That night, the empty plane was destroyed on the tarmac by a rocket. The Republic of Vietnam, South Vietnam, disappeared soon afterwards.

At the airport, the immigration official who stamped my passport leaned over from his booth and whispered: “Do you have any dollars to sell?”

People started to scream and run in all directions

The atmosphere of a world falling apart was heightened when the Reuters colleague who had just driven me in from the airport asked me to hand the car keys to the bureau chief.

“But are you not coming into the office?” I asked. “I am, but I don’t speak to that c__t,” he replied angrily. Wow! A war in the office to match a war outside! Just what was needed to cover the world’s biggest story of the day.

It was amazingly muggy, and the heavy tropical sky was dark with rain clouds as thunder rumbled in the distance.

I had not been in the office for an hour when the ground suddenly shook from several heavy explosions and people started to scream and to run in all directions.

A pair of South Vietnamese combat planes roared low overhead, passing over the presidential palace 200 yards away. We were later told they were defecting to the Communist side.

Small-arms fire rattled intermittently for two days as the city spun out of control.

Grey-clad policemen ran into doorways to cast off uniforms, emerging in their underwear. South Vietnam’s omnipresent national flag, yellow with red horizontal stripes, disappeared.

Residents ran up the French tricolor hoping shaky ties with the former colonial power might protect them.

The French flags were soon replaced by Taiwan flags, then Chinese communist flags and, ultimately, by hastily sewn Viet Cong banners as rumors swept panic-stricken residents about the intentions and alliances of their conquerors or liberators.

“If you marry her, she will pay you a lot of money.”

In the lobby of the posh Caravelle Hotel, a Vietnamese man grabbed my arm and pointed to a sultry Vietnamese woman sitting nearby, her face frozen in a haughty expression.

Clearly thanks to surgery, she had rounded Westerner’s eyes and a Jayne Mansfield-type bust.

“She’s a very famous actress, but the Communists will kill her because she’s made films for the government. If you marry her and get her out of Vietnam on your foreign passport, she will pay you a lot of money,” her agent pleaded. I slipped away, apologetically mumbling I was already married.

Looting erupted as the population realized buses taking Americans to the airport were not coming back. Streets filled with barefoot children struggling to take chairs and desks bigger than themselves from abandoned American premises.

That night, we stood on the hotel roof and gaped as Communist shells turned night into day, blasting the airport’s giant fuel reservoirs into fiery torches, with greasy orange flames billowing hundreds of meters into the air.

The situation became even crazier the following day when helicopters became the only way out and I bade goodbye to my three colleagues, who were helicoptered out to a U.S. aircraft carrier at sea.

Thousands of South Vietnamese officials and employees of the U.S. military besieged the American embassy begging for seats.

Marines beat them back with fists and rifle butts before shooting over their heads. Most were left behind, some to face years in Communist “re-education” camps.

The mood at the press hotel recalled a boy-scout outing as journalists departed, lugging cameras, guitars and, for some, rifles picked up on battlefields. “It’s ‘bye-bye Saigon,” one chanted, swigging from a bottle of beer.

Smoke rose from the U.S. embassy courtyard. We were told guards burned nearly \$3 million in small bills used to pay informers. The notes were too cumbersome to fly out.

There was no cheering

The Communists moved in suddenly at noon on Wednesday, just hours after the last American helicopter flew out, leaving hundreds of desperate allies on rooftop helipads, waiting with families and luggage for a rescue that would not happen.

Muscular North Vietnamese regulars headed to the presidential palace. Barefoot, teenage guerrillas, including not a few young women, took over the main Tu-Do Street, the fabled Rue Catinat of French colonial lore.

The northerners were extraordinarily proud of their exploits but also astounded by Saigon. Most had never seen a multi-storied building before, and they laughed incredulously when handed the first cans of soft drinks they ever encountered.

The atmosphere lightened when the Saigonese realized there were not going to be massacres of suspected “collaborators,” such as occurred when Hue fell in the 1968 Tet offensive.

But there was no cheering. Although the Saigonese liked Americans mostly for their money, there seemed to be few sincere communist sympathizers around.



The author at Saigon’s Tan Son Hut airport with two Reuters colleagues – Neil Davis who was killed covering a coup attempt in Thailand in 1985, on the left, and Nayan Chanda on the right – in May 1975.

That night, there was a muffled knock at my door, and a trembling, grey-faced young American I had met on arrival slipped into the room. He was a skinny ex-G.I. with a greasy Elvis Presley hairdo and a cigarette pack tucked in the rolled sleeve of his T-shirt.

The jobless misfit had returned from New York a week earlier “to save my girlfriend from the commies.”

He had gone looking for her the previous night in the waterfront bars where she plied an ancient trade. “I didn’t find her, but I met a couple of her friends. We got plastered, and I guess I slept through the evacuation. You gotta save me.”

With about 100 other Americans left behind, he spent a year in a Red Cross hostel before the Communists let him leave.

Also left behind was our office's famed "memorial desk," since written about by such authors as John Le Carré.

An old beaten-up wooden desk, it was covered by a huge glass top under which generations of Reuters journalists put small identity pictures of themselves when serving in Vietnam.

Among them were pictures of Australian Bruce Pigott and Briton Ron Laramy, shot and killed in Vietnam in 1968, and of Neil Davis, a kind and brave Australian cameraman and part-time reporter for Reuters during and after Saigon's fall. Davis was killed covering a coup attempt in Thailand in 1985.

What a waste!

I went back to Saigon in 1977 when some locals who had known me two years earlier fell into my arms in tears and asked me to help get them out of the country, which was finally at peace but where many people were clearly going hungry. "When are the Americans coming back?" I was asked.

Returning to Vietnam in 2012, I found an extraordinarily bustling and increasingly prosperous country in what had finally become another of Southeast Asia's "tiger" economies.

My conclusion: What a waste the war was! Hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese and tens of thousands of American G.I.'s killed so that Vietnam could become what the Communists had fought against for 30 years — a wildcat capitalist society with immense differences between rich and poor.

What was the sense of the war and the deaths that accompanied it?

I spoke to a university student when last there and asked what communism meant to him. He replied that one could enroll at university only if a party member. "What does that entail?" I asked. "

"Going to a Communist Party lecture once a week at university, where they take your name when you enter the hall to make sure that you are present."

"What do they lecture you about?" I asked. "I don't know. We all sleep through the lecture — and the teacher knows it! He's got to make a living too!"

The Americans dumped their allies when they left the country while the Communists dumped their own ideals.

Also etched in my mind is this: I grew up in the United States in the 1950s, and I later saw middle-class high school friends go through contortions in the mid-1960s to avoid having to serve in Vietnam once they left university.

Like George W. Bush, Bill Clinton and Donald Trump, they avoided Vietnam, leaving the urban white poor, rednecks and Afro-Americans to get killed in their place while they had a great time at Woodstock or fled across the border to Canada.

What a sham the anti-war movement was!

Perhaps the only one who later honestly recognized the hypocrisy was singer Joan Baez, a leading light of the anti-war protests. In 1979, she denounced the situation in Vietnam when she saw that possibly 1.5 million Vietnamese boat people had fled the country — with up to 200,000 drowning — because of the worsening conditions there under the new regime.

(For more stories in our series about the 1960s, click [here](#).)

Bernard Edinger was a correspondent for Reuters for 32 years. A French national raised mostly in the United States, he joined Reuters in 1969 and was assigned to London, Paris, Tel Aviv, Jerusalem and Nairobi. He was sent as a “fireman” to cover the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, the 1975 Fall of Saigon, the entry of Soviet troops in Afghanistan in 1979 and coups, hijacks and droughts in Africa.



(Source: <https://news-decoder.com/2018/05/08/vietnam-when-saigon-fell/>)