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PROLOGUE

It was a beautiful day in Da Nang. The sun was flashing on the river outside the window of my office in the American Consulate General. But the news I had become privy to the day before was not happy news. I knew that bright days were going to be few and far between for the people of Da Nang and South Vietnam in the spring of 1975.

I returned my attention to the task at hand: drafting a telegram informing the embassy in Saigon that I wanted to evacuate the American and Vietnamese staff and their families from Da Nang immediately, in a phased manner, in anticipation of what I felt sure would be the final assault of the North Vietnamese Communists upon this northern region of South Vietnam. As I was finishing the cable recommending that a U.S. naval fleet be sent to the South China Sea to assist what I expected to be a massive flood of refugees from South Vietnam, there was a knock on my door. My secretary answered it and showed in Mary Francis, the wife of the American consul general, whose deputy I was at the time and who had himself been evacuated to the United States a few weeks before for medical reasons. She had hosted a coffee that afternoon for the wives of American staffers and wanted to bring me a treat from it. She gave my secretary and me a few Chinese fortune cookies and left us to our work.

The cable completed, I sat back and once more surveyed the lovely Han River outside my window. I knew that my cable would not be welcome in Saigon or in Washington. I knew that the ambassador in Saigon—who at that very moment was in Washington pressing his views on the administration—would not share my analysis of the intelligence that had prompted me to seek permission to begin an evacuation. As I dispatched the telegram, I had every expectation that the response from Saigon and Washington would be a demand for my own immediate recall.

My secretary brought me a cup of coffee, and we opened our fortune cookies. I relaxed on the sofa for a moment and read, “You’ve come a long way, baby.”

From chapter 5, BACK TO VIETNAM

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The Military Situation Worsens

The military situation throughout Vietnam worsened in early 1975, as the North Vietnamese grew even bolder in their violations of the Paris accords, for which, ironically, Le Duc Tho and Henry Kissinger received the Nobel Peace Prize. From my attendance at the I Corps morning briefings, I was fully aware of the fighting, which was increasing throughout the western part of the region. At the same time, the U.S. Congress was failing to provide the continued economic and military logistical assistance that had been promised to the South Vietnamese to persuade them to accede to the Paris accords.

In late January 1975, the North Vietnamese captured a provincial capital in the Mekong Delta. No effort was made to recapture this psychologically significant town. This failure convinced me that South Vietnam would not survive long.

I was scheduled to depart Da Nang at the end of February 1975, upon the conclusion of my eighteen-month tour of duty. As I was mentally preparing for my departure, Consul General Al Francis fell ill. It became evident that his illness was serious and required treatment in the United States. I urged Al to leave, saying that I would postpone my departure from the post until his return. He reluctantly agreed to accept medical evacuation to the United States and got approval for an extension of my stay. I had received orders to report to the State Department’s Bureau of Intelligence

and Research to work as an analyst on Southeast Asian issues. A few weeks' delay in departing would not affect this assignment.

Three CODELs

I became the acting principal officer at the American consulate general in Da Nang at a crucial time in the denouement of U.S. involvement in Vietnam. I was in charge for approximately three weeks. During one two-week period, we hosted three congressional delegations (CODELs): one delegation of staff only, two of members and staff. These delegations allegedly were intended to give congressmen a firsthand look at the situation in the country so as to encourage them to vote in favor of the assistance South Vietnam needed.

General Truong cooperated wholeheartedly in our effort to expose our congressional visitors to the realities of the situation in I Corps. On one occasion, the general agreed to take the most influential of our CODELs on a tour of some of the sensitive areas in the region. That morning, I had learned at the I Corps briefing that fighting at one location had been intense, and at least one South Vietnamese helicopter had been shot down. In late morning, General Truong personally piloted the visiting congressmen and me by helicopter to check out the situation. At one point I looked down and saw that we were flying low over the spot where the ARVN helicopter had been shot down just hours before—its wreckage was visible beneath us. The general caught my eye, with a twinkle in his. I read his glance and said, "General, I know where we are." He smiled, and we were soon out of this particularly hazardous area. The congressmen were oblivious to the danger.

The delegation was impressed by what General Truong and his people had accomplished in I Corps. One of them, who had served with the U.S. Marines in the region, told me that when he was in I Corps, the peaceful rice paddies we were then flying over had clearly been in Viet Cong hands, and had not been as richly cultivated as they were at this time. Nonetheless, the congressmen held out little hope that the United States would provide the aid needed to stave off what ultimately became the major, final invasion by the North Vietnamese of the South, in blatant violation of the 1973 Paris Peace Accords.

The admiration of all three of the visiting CODELs was to no avail. Congress shortly thereafter cut vital assistance to Vietnam.

Evacuation Plans

In preparation for my departure, I arranged for my personal belongings at my residence to be packed one morning in mid-March; I remained at home while the packing was being done. The phone rang. It was General Truong's chief of staff, Colonel Dang, asking whether the general could use the consulate general's small jet plane for a quick trip to Saigon, where he would meet with President Thieu. I said I would check to see if the plane was available and get back to him as soon as possible. The officer who scheduled the use of the plane assured me that it was available, and I communicated that to Colonel Dang.

As soon as I arrived at the consulate general, a senior officer came to my office and showed me a report he had just prepared for dispatch to Saigon. It reported that President Thieu had decided to strengthen the defense of Saigon to create an enclave there, and possibly in a few other key cities. To do this, he had ordered General Truong to dispatch some of his key troops to Saigon immediately. The marine division, based north of the Hai Van Pass in the northern part of Military Region I, and the airborne division, based in Da Nang, were to be redeployed to Saigon. The ARVN First Division, based north of the Hai Van Pass, would be redeployed to the Da Nang area. The northern part of I Corps would be denuded of troops—in effect, that territory, which contained the former Imperial

capital, Hue, would be ceded to the advancing North Vietnamese troops. General Truong had requested an urgent meeting with President Thieu to object to these redeployments.

I was stunned. I had sensed that collapse was near, but these redeployments, in my view, would not create safe enclaves for the continuation of a shrunken Republic of Vietnam. They would instead cause the immediate collapse of I Corps and, rapidly thereafter, the loss of the entire country to the North Vietnamese. I doubted that General Truong would be able to dissuade Thieu from this plan. My thoughts immediately turned to preparing for the evacuation of Consulate General Da Nang.

Emergency Evacuation Plan: Worthless

Every diplomatic and consular establishment of the United States has a plan for the emergency evacuation of staff, dependents, and foreign national employees. I had already reviewed the plan for Da Nang (a portion of the overall embassy plan) and had determined that it would be worthless in the current situation. The plan described a simultaneous evacuation of the embassy and all of its outlying posts, not the collapse of the country in phases, as now seemed imminent to me. Nor did the plan make adequate provision for the evacuation of our Vietnamese employees—as I recall, it made absolutely no provision for such evacuation. Abandoning our employees to the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong was simply not acceptable. The slaughter by the North Vietnamese in Hue of any Vietnamese who had cooperated with the Americans was too fresh in my mind to allow me to neglect their fate.

I convened a meeting of key consulate general section heads—consular, the provincial office chief, my two political officers, and a CIA representative—and cautioned them to keep our discussions absolutely secret. I filled them in to the extent I felt I could about what I anticipated to be the looming I Corps collapse, and said we had to design a new evacuation plan. In my own mind, I had already decided that we should evacuate all of our formal Vietnamese employees and their spouses and children. Given the large size of Vietnamese families, I reluctantly decided that we could not offer to evacuate parents and siblings and their families. I did not initially disclose my thinking to the staff, but asked them to consider the matter carefully, share ideas among themselves, and to come up with an estimate of the numbers we might have to evacuate under different scenarios. I said we would meet the next day to review our thinking.

Meanwhile, General Truong returned empty-handed from his brief expedition to Saigon. I learned almost immediately through our CIA station that Thieu had refused to reconsider his redeployment plans.

When the planning staff met with me the next day, I shared this information with them. We talked through various scenarios about local national evacuation, and reached agreement on the plan I had privately decided would be appropriate: we would offer evacuation to Saigon to all of our Vietnamese employees, their spouses, and children. We concluded that we could not offer evacuation to the several hundred guards on the consulate general's payroll—principally ethnic minorities who guarded (unarmed) all of our facilities and houses—as they were not as closely identified with the work of the consulate general as the formal employees. We agreed that we should begin a phased evacuation, beginning with the few dozen American spouses and dependents at the post. Thereafter, we would quietly phase down our operations, beginning with our constituent posts, which were most exposed. To avoid panicking the Vietnamese military and civilian population, with potentially dangerous effects on our efforts and personnel, we would keep a skeleton staff at these posts as long as possible.

I then turned to my secretary and dictated a cable to Saigon, outlining my conviction that the planned withdrawal of key military units from I Corps would result in the collapse of the region to the North Vietnamese. My staff had estimated the air assets we would require to begin the evacuation; I

requested these assets and the authorization to begin the evacuation. I included the recommendation that U.S. naval assets be positioned in the South China Sea to handle what I assumed would be a massive refugee outpouring from South Vietnam. It was at this point, as I noted at the beginning of this book, that Mary Francis, Al's wife, who had been hosting a coffee for consulate general wives, came to my office bearing treats for my secretary and me. I opened a fortune cookie and read its prescient observation: "You've come a long way, baby."

I signed the cable, but before dispatching it, I took it to the CIA station chief for his information. I did not want to risk battling a difference of opinion with Saigon should he not agree that the situation was grave and required immediate action. He read the cable and suggested that I add a sentence saying that he had reviewed the message and concurred with my recommendations.

I authorized the cable to be sent and reflected that, given Ambassador Martin's optimistic outlook, I might well be on the next plane to Washington, disgraced. Fortunately for us all, however, Martin was in Washington at that time getting dental work done (and, I have no doubt, attempting to shore up congressional support for the fading effort in Vietnam). His deputy, Wolf Lehmann, was chargé d'affaires. He immediately approved my requests. The very capable USAID staff in the provincial offices and in Da Nang began putting our evacuation plans in motion.

I called on the beleaguered General Truong and informed him of our decisions and our plans to begin evacuating our staff, including Vietnamese and their families. At the recommendation of our provincial officers, I asked his permission to include in our evacuation the ARVN military personnel who served at our provincial offices as interpreters. He agreed. We discussed the situation at length. I was sadly confident that my grim analysis was correct, and that I Corps would not hold once the marines and airborne divisions had departed, and that the loss of I Corps—particularly of Hue, the beautiful former imperial capital—would trigger the collapse of the entire country.

The next several days passed in a blur of activity. Our American dependents were evacuated to Saigon. Gradually, our Vietnamese employees and their families, almost all of whom seized the opportunity to leave, began the trip to Saigon. As I recall, the embassy assigned a C-47 airplane and a helicopter exclusively for our use. The USAID provincial officers performed splendidly. This was demonstrated in one instance when they rebuffed the demand of a bullying U.S. Army colonel who wanted to use the helicopter for his own survey of the situation. I had resisted allowing this officer to visit Da Nang on his long-planned trip, and had been assured that he understood that he would get no logistical support from the consulate general and would not be able to leave Da Nang. He had come in any event, and almost immediately he had begun demanding the use of our evacuation helicopter. Unfazed by his pressure, the USAID officer said that Miss Tull had forbidden our air assets to be used for anything except staff evacuation. The colonel huffed and said he would see about that, but he had the good sense, apparently, to give it up; he did not approach me.

The problem we faced in Da Nang was that, except for a very few people, most of the Americans in the U.S. embassy and mission in Saigon did not comprehend that the end was nearing. Despite the loss of the provincial capital in the delta and the collapse occurring in II Corps Central Highlands, and the fact that we had begun a quiet evacuation of personnel from Da Nang, many of these people apparently were going about their usual business. I was particularly angered by a high-handed phone call from the head of USIS in Saigon, who practically ordered me to make one of our helicopters available to the director of the Imperial Museum in Hue for the removal of the valuable porcelains and other antiques from the museum. I explained that we had to use our helicopter to evacuate personnel. He persisted, indignantly, and was angered when I finally told him that our air assets would be used for people whose lives could well be in grave danger soon, and not to carry antique pots. He blustered and I finally said I was too busy to continue the conversation.

Maintaining a Provincial Presence

As the military situation worsened, I became increasingly concerned about the safety of our American personnel who worked in our provincial offices. After consultation with their Da Nang chief, I instructed these officers to come to Da Nang in the evenings, and to return to their posts in the mornings, situation permitting. Their daylight presence facilitated the evacuation of personnel and helped to prevent a panic.

Meanwhile, my own departure prompted certain protocol activities. General Truong, in appreciation for my support, and in recognition of the U.S. contribution to Vietnam over the years, awarded me a Vietnamese medal at a simple ceremony following a morning briefing at I Corps. He was initially nonplussed as he moved to pin the medal on me, as he would have done with a man, but thought better of it and handed the medal to me instead. I was deeply moved to be so recognized.

General Truong and his wife later hosted a farewell dinner for me as days in Da Nang grew fewer. On this particular day, we were finishing up the evacuation of our people from Quang Ngai province. In Quang Ngai, there was a group of antiwar American Quakers, who were assisting the Vietnamese in health-related activities, providing prostheses for people who had lost limbs. Someone in the consulate general had contacted them and offered evacuation. They had thus far declined. David Harr called me late in the day from Quang Ngai. I was in the consulate general, dressed in an attractive long dress preparatory to attending General Truong's dinner. David was very concerned because the Quakers had again refused to take advantage of our offer to help them leave. I told him to try once again—to tell them that this was their last chance, that we would not be taking the helicopter to Quang Ngai again, as our evacuation there was finished. If they still refused, David was to return to Da Nang, knowing that we had done our best to provide for these Americans. They refused, and ultimately spent some time in detention when the North Vietnamese took over the province.

As the North Vietnamese troops grew nearer to Hue, the population responded by “voting with their feet.” A mass exodus began, with people abandoning their homes and livelihoods and fleeing by any means down the Hai Van Pass to what they hoped would be a more secure situation in the Da Nang area. At one point I was approached by Don Oberdorfer, a *Washington Post* reporter whose work I respected, about the possibility of getting transportation to Hue. I authorized his passage to Hue on our helicopter, in the forlorn hope that his reporting of how the people of I Corps did not wish to live under Communism might help generate more U.S. support. At a minimum, he would tell an accurate story of what was happening. He was grateful for the lift.

The same evening of the Truong dinner, we were also just about completing our drawdown from our office in Hue. I went to the Truong residence, carrying my two-way radio and getting reports from our officers in Hue. I asked the senior officer there to come to the general's residence when he returned to Da Nang to report to us both on the deteriorating situation. General Truong, of course, was in constant communication with his own aides, but he welcomed the report from a fresh source.

Shortly before dinner was served, Mrs. Truong took me aside and quietly asked me whether, if the Communists took over the country, I would take their children to the United States. I looked at this beautiful woman for a moment and said that I would. At dinner, I was seated to the right of General Truong. Across the table from me was our CIA station chief. I decided to confirm once more that the situation was as grave as I thought it was. I said to the general, in Vietnamese (because I did not want the station chief, who did not speak the language, to know about this new development yet), that his wife had asked me to take their children to the United States if the country was taken over by the Communists, and that I had agreed. He looked at me for a long moment and then said, “Thank you

very much.” I needed no further confirmation. The next day I told the station chief what I had agreed to.