

Leaving Saigon

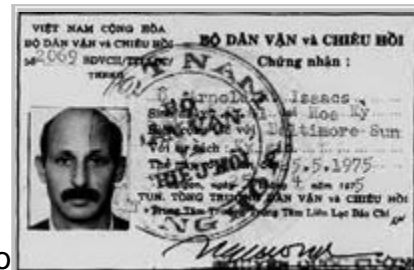
Thirty years after the end of the war

April 2005

Thirty years since April '75—good grief. It seems almost too trite to say, but it doesn't seem that it could possibly have been that long ago. Every April reminds me of the end of the Vietnam war, this one more than most, not just because of the round number but because of an encounter with the past that I had just a couple of weeks before the actual anniversary. The following ruminations are longer than I intended, but here they are anyway ...

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For almost the whole time I was in Vietnam, I wondered from time to time what it would be like to be involved in a war where you could tell that one side was winning and the other losing. My father's war, for example. Things were pretty muddy in the China-Burma-India theater where he was, but at least he would have known about the Normandy invasion and the Russians advancing on the eastern front and the island campaigns in the Pacific coming closer and closer to the Japanese home islands. Knowing about those battles, I suppose, he would also have been able to imagine the war ending—not the details or the date, maybe, but at least he'd have had in his mind an understanding that the war would sooner or later be over. In Vietnam, though, until the very last weeks, the idea of an end was absolutely impossible to imagine. If you tried to conjure up a landscape without the war, you couldn't. No picture formed in your mind. There was just no way to add up what you knew about the two sides without coming to the conclusion that neither one was weak enough to lose or strong enough to win, and that consequently the war would just go on and on.



Arnold R. Isaacs' last South Vietnamese press card, from 1975.

Actually it was more than just calculating the relative strengths and positions of the two sides that led to that conclusion. Vietnam was not linear, like other wars. There was no narrative. One battle did not lead to or affect the next. You could look at the bodies and the smashed villages after the fighting ended somewhere but you couldn't see any change in the war, any indication that one side was any closer to winning or losing. Battles were like grenades thrown in a stream—after the splash subsided and the noise died away and the dead fish floated downstream, the stream looked exactly as it did before, running between the same banks with the same force and appearance it had always had. The correspondents called it Permawar and made sour jokes about how if our kids had the bad judgment to follow our calling, they'd be out here covering Vietnam twenty or thirty years after us and writing stories that would sound exactly the same as ours.

It was because it had seemed so immovably endless for so long, I suppose, that when things changed abruptly and all of a sudden you could see the ending in front of your eyes, coming at you like an express train, it was almost impossible to absorb that any of it was really happening. Those weeks in March and April of 1975 when the South Vietnamese army and government suddenly disintegrated and the Communist army captured whole provinces in a day or two were surreal in a way I have never experienced at any other time, before or since. I knew that the scenes of fear and flight I wrote about every day were real. But they felt much more like something in a dream. When I remember those days, which I do fairly often (especially at this time of year), they still have that eerie dreamlike quality.

Beside the dreaminess, the other odd thing about my memory of that spring is an unshakable feeling that I spent those weeks by myself, without speaking to anyone. I know that's not true, but it's how I remember it. There are memories that remain clear and vivid: the angry, humiliated militiaman in Tuy Hoa who had lost most of his family on the road from Pleiku, and his friend who I thought was going to throw a grenade at me; the swarm of refugees on the waterless beach of Phu Quoc Island racing desperately after a water truck with tin cans or plastic pails in their hands; the choked voice of the American embassy official on the telephone, telling about the crash of the U.S. Air Force's first Babylift flight that was supposed to be rescuing orphans, but instead left more than a hundred children and escorting adults dead and broken in a muddy field a mile and a half from the Saigon airport.

I remember writing about those moments and others and then waiting in the stifling telex office, sometimes for hours, to make sure my stories went through. (It may be hard for today's reporters to imagine, but that was still a world without satellite phones, computers or e-mail.) What I cannot remember is sharing any of that time with colleagues, though I know I did. I know exactly who was with me that day in Tuy Hoa, for example—though we were separated when I encountered the guy with the grenade—and although I don't remember who all of them were, I know I was with a group of other reporters on that strange trip to Phu Quoc. I'm sure we exchanged information and the kind of black wisecracks that reporters are prone to. I'd have done the same with other colleagues during waits at the telex office, or when we ran into each other on the hotel terrace (the legendary Continental Shelf) or at some restaurant. But I cannot remember any of that at all. In my mind, it is as if I spent the whole last period of the war in complete silence, alone.

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This April, my wife and I were in Seattle for a few days, and on one of them we drove our rental car out to one of the city's northern suburbs to visit someone from that part of my personal history. She doesn't want me to publish her real name. I asked her what she'd like to be called, and she quickly chose the name Nguyen Thao—Thao Nguyen, if you use American name order. (I have respected her request to change her name, but nothing else in her story has been altered. Every other detail is presented here exactly as I remember it or as she told me.) All Vietnamese names have meanings, and when she told me the name she'd chosen, I wondered what it meant. "Sharing," she told me.

The day we visited her, Thao was six days away from her 61st birthday, a slightly stocky woman with a broad face and a cheerful, vigorous manner. It had been on her birthday three decades before that she left Saigon, ten days before the Communist troops entered the city. That was also the last time I'd seen her.

Thao had come into my life a few days earlier when she knocked at the door of my Saigon hotel room carrying a letter from my sister, Debby Shipler, asking me to help her leave the South Vietnamese capital. Thao and my sister, who had left Saigon some months before, knew each other through the Holt adoption agency, where Thao helped teach the kids waiting for adoption and Debby had been a volunteer and also adopted her oldest son, my nephew Jonathan. Thao hadn't previously planned to give her own half-American son up for adoption. But when South Vietnam started collapsing, she put him on one of the orphan flights—a day after the one that crashed—and was now desperate to get out herself and retrieve her son, then four and a half, before he was given to an American family.

She didn't want to send him away, she told me tearfully, but she was afraid the Communists would kill any children who'd been fathered by Americans, and likely the mothers as well. Predictably, that fear turned out to be hugely exaggerated. But at the time, with U.S. and South Vietnamese leaders issuing daily hysterical predictions of a terrible bloodbath after a Communist victory, it was inevitable that vast numbers of Vietnamese women with half-American children shared Thao's terror for their children and themselves.

As it happened, I was able to help, though not through any particular virtue or effort of my own. Around the same time Thao sought me out, the American embassy agreed to clandestinely evacuate Vietnamese employees of U.S. news organizations. I cannot verify this but I am fairly sure that Ambassador Graham Martin, whose general attitude toward the journalists in Saigon was that we were a pack of disloyal defeatists, was not motivated by any humanitarian concern. Much more likely is that the purpose was to ward off any reporting on the whole issue of getting endangered Vietnamese—or those who felt themselves endangered—out of the country before the now inevitable Communist victory.

I know of no explicit promise of silence, but none was needed. Any reporting on that subject would have jeopardized the entire deal, and as far as I know, no journalist broke the story. (The whole story is too long and weird to tell here, but it's necessary to explain that while approving the clandestine evacuation of news media employees, Ambassador Martin continued almost until the last day to block the departure of thousands of other Vietnamese working for his own and other U.S. agencies. Martin feared that if word of any evacuation got out, it would panic the South Vietnamese leadership. His position caused a good deal of anguish and eventually a sizable rebellion inside the official American community. Many of his subordinates, convinced that his policies would keep their Vietnamese staffs from leaving until it was too late, began smuggling their employees out in direct violation of the ambassador's orders. By making an exception for media employees, Martin forestalled having the issue publicized when journalists got wind of it, as they inevitably would.)

I put Thao, and three others, on my list of "employees" who wanted to leave. None of them actually worked for me. Brian Ellis, the amiable Brit who ran the

CBS bureau and was the liaison person between journalists and the embassy in arranging and carrying out the evacuation, could probably have figured that out, if he'd been inclined to. But Brian chose not to look for ringers on the evacuation lists, though he'd have been completely justified in doing so. Instead, he decided that he'd help anyone he had a chance to help. When I saw Thao in Seattle 30 years later, I told her that if she wanted to thank anyone for helping her get out, Brian was the one who did the most to make it possible—not only by putting her on the list but in getting her to the plane as well, about which more in a moment.

I can't and don't defend the ethics of any of this. Journalists can't ethically trade silence for special consideration, and I knew that by putting non-employees on the list, I risked bollixing the deal for hundreds of real employees, some of whom had been getting shot at for their U.S. employers for many years. That said, in 30 years I have had no second thoughts about what I did, and if the same circumstances occurred tomorrow, I would do exactly the same again. Sometimes, life trumps the rules, and the ethical decision and the right decision are not the same.

After I gave Thao's and the others' names to be put on the evacuation list, the deal was that they should keep checking in with me every few hours, and be ready to leave on two hours notice. I don't remember how long this went on, but it must have lasted at least three or four days, maybe longer. Keeping in touch wasn't such a simple matter, given that I was also scrambling around every day trying to cover a huge, exhausting story. Thao had no telephone, and although I don't have a specific memory of it, it is highly probable that two of the other three didn't either. I wrote down all their addresses and carried them with me, so that in an emergency I could try to go get them if they hadn't called me. I don't entirely trust my memory on this but I believe that when I got word from Brian to assemble my group, I did have to go collect at least one of them, not Thao but the mother of my former interpreter (who was already in the States). I wouldn't have remembered the date but Thao does, because it was her 31st birthday: April 20, 1975, ten days before Saigon surrendered.

Once they were all in my room, we waited for Brian to call with the plan for getting them on their way. The main problem was getting into Tansonnhut air base. The Tansonnhut gates were controlled by South Vietnamese military police, called QC (for Quan Canh). For obvious reasons, the QC's couldn't be let in on the deal—if they knew about it, they'd have tried to beg or shoot their way onto the evacuation flights themselves. So our evacuees had to be smuggled past the checkpoints. Some of my colleagues solved the problem by buying tickets for their employees on domestic flights, a few of which were still flying to areas that had not yet been lost to the Communists. Others tried more inventive tactics. On one occasion, George Esper, the AP bureau chief, packed as many of his staff as would fit in his jeep, drove out to Tansonnhut and made a U-turn before getting near the gate, so he was in the lane of traffic coming out of the base. George eased over to the shoulder on the far side of the traffic lane and then began gradually backing up, moving a few yards closer to the gate whenever he could see that the QC's weren't looking in his direction. It almost worked, but at the last moment he was spotted and turned away.

In other cases, our evacuees got onto the base with the help of contacts among the spooks or DAO (Defense Attache Office) types who could get people through the checkpoints without having to show passes or ID's. I assume that's how Brian got my little group past the gate, though I never learned any details. All I knew, when he finally called my room after several tense hours, was that they were to leave the hotel and walk up Tu Do street separately, not as a group, to the square in front of the Saigon cathedral. They were to wait there, within eyeshot of each other but not together, on the right side of the square next to the main post office, and someone would pick them up. They couldn't carry suitcases, I had to warn them, or anything that would indicate they were leaving the city; they could take only as many belongings as they could fit into a couple of shopping bags, so they would look like any other Saigon citizens coming back from the market.

I gave them as many dollars as I thought I could spare—like most of my colleagues, I kept a pretty hefty stash, figuring that any time I was out on a story I might have to bribe my way onto someone's vehicle or plane or helicopter to get out. They left their Vietnamese piastres with me, since if everything worked, they wouldn't need them any more (and with the end of the war clearly just days or a few weeks away, pretty soon nobody else would need piastres either). And they left.

I suppose I must have said goodbye and wished them luck, but I have no memory of that. I just remember hoping that they would be OK and that Thao would get her son back, and feeling ashamed and sad and angry, all those like a heavy weight in my stomach, that this war existed and that this kind of terror and misery was being visited on so many lives.

The next time I saw Thao, after 30 years, she greeted Kathy and me at the door to her comfortable apartment, accepted the flowers I had brought, and asked if we would like some green tea. Before turning to make it, she took a photograph album from a living room shelf and put it in front of me.

I looked through it while she was busy at the stove. There were photos of Thao as a cute young girl and as a pretty teenager in the Catholic orphanage in Dalat where she and her sister and brother had grown up after their parents died; later photos taken when she was living on U.S. bases, first at Qui Nhon and later at the huge base in Danang. Her sister and the nuns at the orphanage broke off relations with her when she left Dalat to go to work on the base in Qui Nhon, she told me, because any Vietnamese woman working for the Americans was considered to have become a prostitute, whether she really was or not. Eventually the photos included the American she lived with for several years who became the father of her son. There were some pages of pictures showing both of them with the baby, then more pictures with just the child and Thao, after the father went back to the States and disappeared from their lives. (All this was new to me; I had never known any of the details of Thao's life other than the circumstances that brought her to my door in April '75.) Toward the end of the album, my sister and her husband appear in some of the photos.

As I was sitting on her couch turning the album pages, Thao stunned me by saying that she had brought it with her to my room on her last day in Saigon, packed in a suitcase, and that when I told her she couldn't take the suitcase with her she left it with me, and I had managed to send it out before the city fell. It had come to the Holt agency's home office, she said, and she retrieved it there. I did not remember this at all, and I also could not imagine how I would have gotten it out in the growing chaos of those last days. I wondered if Thao was remembering something that didn't happen. Her other memories seemed sharp and completely accurate, though, and it was also pretty hard to think of any other way she could have gotten that suitcase out. So perhaps it was my memory, or absence of memory, that was wrong.

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Eight days after Thao and the others walked out of my room, I and I suppose most of the other correspondents who were still in Saigon gathered in the big white presidential palace on Cong Ly boulevard to watch Duong Van Minh sworn in as South Vietnam 's third president in seven days. (Nguyen Van Thieu, the U.S.-backed wartime ruler since the mid-1960s, had resigned on April 21 and was secretly flown out of the country a couple of days later. Thieu's vice president, the frail, half-blind Tran Van Huong, held the office for a week and then agreed to turn over power to Minh as a possible peacemaker—at least, that was how Minh saw himself, though it was an obvious fantasy.)

Thunderclaps from an early pre-monsoon rainstorm rattled the palace windows while Minh made his speech, and afterward, as I was walking back to my hotel through the steamy evening air, I thought at first that the new explosions I heard were another thunderstorm. A few seconds later I realized it wasn't thunder but bombs. They were falling four miles away at Tansonnhut but some fluke of air currents and building lines created a concussion wave that made the explosions feel much closer than that. In a moment or two, the sound of the bombs was joined by antiaircraft bursts from the guns on the palace grounds and then by a pandemonium of rifle and machinegun fire as soldiers and policemen all over the city blazed away blindly into the low, damp clouds.

I didn't know what was happening, which was that Communist pilots in captured South Vietnamese A-37 fighter-bombers had flown the war's first air raid on Tansonnhut air base. But in another sense, I knew right away exactly what I was hearing: the sound of the war ending.

Before dawn the next morning North Vietnamese artillery opened up on Tansonnhut, closing the runways. A few hours later Ambassador Martin finally acquiesced to reality and called in helicopters from the task force waiting offshore to begin the final evacuation. That afternoon, I clambered aboard one of those helicopters and watched the red-tile roofs of Saigon spin away below us as the pilot corkscrewed up from Tansonnhut into a hazy sky. Forty minutes later we felt the wheels bump down and stepped out onto the fantail of the U.S.S. Mobile, looking out at the South China Sea. It was 4:15 p.m. on Tuesday, April 29th. My war was over; Vietnam 's had only another 20 hours to run.

We stayed there a few miles off the coast for three more days, while swarms of refugees reached the evacuation fleet aboard Vietnamese navy vessels, fishing boats, barges, and anything else that would float. Those days were the dreamiest and eeriest of all. I remember the stifling air and the flat shimmering sea and the thick black pillars of smoke where abandoned boats were burning. There was no wind at all so the smoke rose perfectly vertically for hundreds of feet into the sky.

I remember listening on someone's shortwave radio to the news of Saigon's surrender. I also remember the epitaph that came over the Mobile's bridge radios from somewhere in the fleet not long after we landed. A Vietnamese Air Force helicopter—one of scores that flew out to the ships that day—was approaching the task force, and Navy communicators on various ships and an Air America pilot with the call-sign One-three Foxtrot were chattering about where to try to direct the Vietnamese pilot to land. The pilot didn't wait for instructions, though, but dropped down onto the deck of a destroyer. Through the static we could hear what was happening: "Looks like he's made a touchdown...." "Roger." "They don't have any room to keep him." "I think he's gonna go over the side." There was a pause and then we heard another voice, sounding young and shocked: "What a waste!"

No doubt the guy was just thinking about dropping perfectly good Huey helicopters into the drink, but when I heard him I felt that he could have been talking about the whole war, or maybe about the whole world and the whole human race.

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When I remember the evacuation, just as when I remember the weeks before, it feels as if I went through it all alone, without speaking to anyone. It's not true, I know. I could even prove that to myself, if I needed to. There's a UPI photograph that ran in quite a few newspapers back home that shows a group of people lining up to get on a bus to the air base; I'm one of them, and standing just behind or ahead of me, I forget which, is Bud Pratt, who was the Saigon correspondent for Westinghouse News and a reasonably good friend. I haven't found that shot yet, though I'm pretty sure it's in my files somewhere, but I'm fairly sure I would find other acquaintances in it too. Another photo that I did dig out while writing this ran in a Danish magazine (the photographer must have sent it to me in Hong Kong). In it, I am in the foreground, sprinting toward the camera out behind the DAO building at Tansonnhut, where we were running to the helicopter. In the background I can pick out Roy Rowan of Time, who's the one who captured the radio chatter on the Mobile's bridge on his tape recorder and later let me make a transcription—whence the quotes just above.

Beside Roy, there were at least a dozen other journalists and photographers in the group that landed on the Mobile, most of whom I knew and had worked with in one place or another during the previous three years. We must have chatted, during the wait at Tansonnhut and in the helicopter and during those long dreamy sweltering days at sea, but I have no memory of it. From that entire time I can remember only one conversation, in fact. It was late on the fourth day when our group was flown from the Mobile to the U.S.S. Blueridge, the task force command ship. Arnold Zeitlin, the AP bureau chief in Manila, was aboard the

Blueridge as a pool correspondent. When he saw me getting off the helicopter he came over to say hello. "Remember," he added, with a grin, "you are a refugee. I am covering you."

I didn't think of it this way until I saw Thao again in Seattle, but if my journey out of Vietnam felt weird, hers must have felt inconceivably weirder. She and the others didn't know where they were going when they got on the plane at Tansonnhut, she told me, and didn't know where they were when they landed, until someone finally told them they were at Clark Air Base in the Philippines. I tried to imagine what it would be like to walk out of my life with what I could carry in a shopping bag, leaving everything else I owned and everything I knew, and get on a plane without knowing where I would land. It must feel like flying off the edge of the earth. Maybe it was fitting that Thao left on her birthday. Certainly her journey was something like being born, in the sense of coming out of one world into another that was entirely different and unknown.

Here's what I learned about her life after that second birth: after a week or so in a temporary refugee camp at Clark, Thao was sent to Wake Island and then on to Camp Pendleton, Calif. From there she was able to go to Seattle and, with my sister's help, reunite with her son. In succeeding years she worked on fishing boats in Alaska, married a fellow who worked for Bechtel and went with him to Saudi Arabia for a couple of years, came back, divorced, got trained as a home health care worker and spent the next 17 or 18 years working in that field. Her last patient, a man in his 90s whom she took care of for several years before he died, left Thao some money—enough, with her savings, for her to live on without working full-time. Next year she can start collecting Social Security. She owns a car and her apartment, where she lives with her dog (some kind of toy poodle, I think). Her son, now 34, works as a carpenter.

Last year Thao went back to Vietnam for the first time since the war. She spent about a month there, including a visit to Dalat where she had a reunion and, I gathered, a reconciliation of sorts with her sister. (Their brother disappeared long ago, Thao said, and no one knows where he is.) Maybe it was going back and the memories it must have reawakened that made her think of getting back in touch with me, or maybe she just thought it was time, but somewhere during her trip she bought an embroidered tablecloth and napkin set and sent them to me (through my sister, whom she's kept in touch with) for Christmas, along with a nice note. I wrote back to thank her, and when I was coincidentally invited to Seattle a few months later, called to arrange a visit.

Before we said goodbye, I asked Thao how she felt about her life after Vietnam. "Good," she said. "I am comfortable." She gave me a broad smile and a hug. I felt glad that out of all the misery and terror of that spring, which filled me with sadness and anger that have never completely left me in the 30 years since, this one story, at least, seemed to have come to a happy ending.

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A postscript: when I found the evacuation photo I describe above, the one where I'm running toward the helicopter, I also came across a letter Thao wrote me at the end of May 1975, after she got to the States. In it, she thanked me for my help, and also, to my surprise, for sending her suitcases (the letter mentions two, not one!) to the Holt headquarters. Presumably she wouldn't have been mixed up about that only a month or so after leaving them behind, so evidently I really did get her stuff out, even if I don't remember doing it. I haven't done so many good deeds in my life that I can afford to forget any of them, so I was pleased to learn that there might be one more on the list than I thought.

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