

## LEAVING VIETNAM:

# The One Man We Remembered

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by John D. Marks

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Even as Saigon was about to fall, Walt Whitman Rostow seemed determined to be the last hawk; he called for the use of American military power to “save” Vietnam. While Rostow’s appeal was rejected, Henry Kissinger, his successor as national security advisor to the President, worked feverishly to minimize the damage that the impending defeat would cause American foreign policy. Meanwhile, anti-war leader Fred Branfman rejoiced in the victories of the Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG) as he scurried frantically around Washington in a last unnecessary effort to lobby against the United States becoming reinolved in the war.

But if you were someone like me, who had lived in Vietnam, your thoughts probably had little to do with re-escalation, geopolitics, or solidarity with the revolutionary forces. On a very personal level, you worried about the Vietnamese you had known and liked, whose lives might or might not be in danger.

General Edward Lansdale, who had been the prototype for both *The Ugly American* and *The Quiet American*, was extremely concerned. He had been the CIA’s top Saigon operative in better days, and he told me in May how he had “turned to everyone [he]

could think of to rescue” his former associates. According to Lansdale’s description, in the *Pentagon Papers*, his associates included high Vietnamese officials he had manipulated, secret policemen he had trained, and propagandists he had used to spread false information. He felt a responsibility toward these people as he did for more ordinary folks he had known in Vietnam—secretaries, widows, opposition leaders, and a folk singer named Pham Duy. All during April, the now-retired Lansdale used long-established contacts in Washington, the Philippines, and Saigon to help evacuate as many Vietnamese as possible from their homeland. Other Americans who had served in Vietnam also took matters into their own hands and made the dangerous trip back to Saigon to save some of their friends.

According to an American who has worked closely with Lansdale, “It really took some maneuvering back here to get someone out like [former National Police chief] Pham Van Lieu, who was out of favor with the [Thieu] government.” Lieu eventually was put aboard one of the special planes the U. S. embassy used to evacuate Vietnamese it felt would be targets of the PRG. These flights and their passengers were to a large extent ignored by the press, which focused primarily on the more chaotic move-

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ment of American dependents and those Vietnamese who at times tried to storm their way out.

A State Department official, who himself left Saigon on a refugee flight, estimated that somewhere between 15,000 and 20,000 of the evacuees fell into what he called the "VIP" category. Countless others who were on embassy evacuation lists—or thought they should be—were left behind.

These were "our" Vietnamese—the cabinet ministers, military officers, intelligence agents, U. S. employees, and intellectuals, who for one reason or another had wedded themselves to the American effort in Vietnam. They were not so much the people who had suffered from the war's terrible destruction but those who had prospered from it. And they were the very people who had failed—in the Pentagon's now abandoned phrase—to "hack it" under Vietnamization.

Staying behind would have put most in some form of jeopardy—if not for their lives, certainly for their liberty. The danger was probably felt most sharply by the tens of thousands who had been connected with the CIA in the secret police, Phoenix, and counter-terrorist programs. (The evacuees apparently included a disproportionately high share of CIA-sponsored Vietnamese because the CIA was reportedly the most effective in the bureaucratic infighting within the U. S. government as each agency tried to bring out the maximum number of its own employees and contacts.)

When asked about the immigration of these former intelligence operatives to the United States, Lansdale said, "I know of similar Vietnamese who went out with the French in 1954, and they are very constructive citizens over there. I know of one group who were terrific commando types—rebels at heart. Now they run a big home construction firm in France, and apparently they're very successful." Lansdale believed that Vietnamese who had been involved in unsavory

While the Vietnamese have been using violent tactics against each other and foreign enemies for thousands of years, the United States brought sophisticated technology to the country and made the killing considerably more efficient. One of our gifts was a national identification card system which allowed the Thieu government to record all its citizens' fingerprints in a giant computerized network.

Most Vietnamese who were unable or unwilling to leave Vietnam and who feel themselves endangered by the new government will be likely to try to blend into the general population. The only way the PRG will be able to systematically identify such people hidden among the millions of uprooted war victims is to put the American identification network back into service. I asked the State Department whether the system had been destroyed or removed. An official spokesman replied, "We don't know. Only the Vietnamese would know."

activity "wouldn't continue *that* here. I think for sure that they all welcome this as a chance to change their lives, and I have to admit they are a thoroughly skilled lot who will take to peaceful endeavors quite easily."

For the rest of us, Lansdale's assurances may be less than satisfactory. The example of the CIA's Cubans whom the White House recycled into plumbers is not comforting. Nor are the reports that some other of the CIA's Cubans now apply their clandestine skills to the domestic drug trade.

Administration spokesmen have told Congress that unless Vietnamese refugees have been convicted of a crime they will be admitted to the United States. Since few corrupt or brutal Vietnamese were ever tried by the Thieu regime, only a handful of the more than 100,000 evacuees fall into this criminal class. In any case, as

State Department refugee coordinator L. Dean Brown has admitted, the United States cannot under international law forcibly repatriate those—even ex-convicts—seeking political asylum.

Furthermore, before anyone suggests that Vietnamese guilty of war crimes be brought to justice in the U. S., it should be remembered that it was our government which conceived and paid for the “neutralizations” under Phoenix, the “provincial interrogation centers,” and the whole secret police apparatus. Saigon’s operatives may have reached levels of brutality that violated the sensibilities of their American “advisors,” but it would be grossly unfair to put the Vietnamese alone in the docket. It was the U. S. government which made life possible for the Thieu regime, and our officials were not blind to the kind of government they were supporting. In fact, embassy officials at the highest level repeatedly failed to take action on documented cases of corruption among “our” Vietnamese.

Any tendency I have to be judgmental is tempered by my own friendship with “Nguyen Van Danh,” who was my interpreter in Vietnam eight years ago. The PRG would call Danh an American “lackey,” and according to their definitions that was certainly true. He had all those qualities—honesty, straightforwardness, efficiency, ambition—which Americans so much wanted to see in the Vietnamese. A Catholic, Danh even believed in one of our gods.

At 17, Danh entered training for the priesthood—a calling which he was well aware would have lifted him several notches above his carpenter-father on the social scale. But he had to leave after three years in the seminary because his family could not afford to keep him there, and he found work as a typist on a rubber plantation. Eager to better himself, he took a correspondence course to finish high school, but he was still unable to pass the all-important

baccalaureate exam. Without his “bac” he felt he would never rise very high in the French-run plantation, nor would he ever get a good job with the Saigon government. He decided the Americans offered his best chance for the future, and he started to study English at his own expense. After three years of army service as an interpreter, Danh found a job with the U. S. Agency for International Development.

I saw Danh again in Vietnam in December 1974, the day before I was arrested in Saigon and then expelled from the country as a “blacklisted journalist.” We talked at length about his life:

*I quit working for the French to get promoted. It was a chance to advance. The Americans seemed to be very friendly to their employees. More than the French, who wanted to be the bosses all the time. With the Americans, I learned many new things, and I really got advanced.*

By the time I arrived in Vietnam in 1966, Danh was the head Vietnamese employee in a rather large AID office. He was making over \$200 a month, which put him well into the middle class, and he was one of the few U. S. government interpreters I ever met who could really speak and understand English. He commiserated with his American bosses about the inertia and corruption of the Saigon government, and he sincerely hoped that the Americans would magically transform his country into a just and prosperous society. He hated the Viet Cong, who had harrassed his family on the plantation, but he also had no love for the Thieu government.

*The Americans, for sure, did not want South Vietnam to be communist. They tried hard to get the Vietnamese troops to do the job. Then the American troops came here, and that was another problem. 500,000 Americans coming in created bad attitudes. The Americans gave too much money to Vietnam. Many people say the Americans don't know how to use their foreign aid. They just*

*gave it to the Vietnamese government and let them spend it. That's why Vietnam got corrupted.*

After the Tet offensive of 1968, at American insistence, South Vietnam finally mobilized all males under 40 not rich enough to buy a deferment. Danh was redrafted, but with a carefully placed bribe he managed to get assigned back to his old job as an American interpreter—now in uniform and at greatly reduced pay. Since he was supporting a wife, three children, and his father, who had been forced off the plantation by Viet Cong threats, he had to take a significant cut in his standard of living. Thus, eight months later he jumped at the opportunity to join the Provincial Reconnaissance Units (PRUs).

The PRUs were established by the CIA in 1965 under the name "Counter-terror Teams." Paid directly by the Agency and largely outside the Saigon government's control, they were supposed to turn the terror tactics of the other side against the other side. In 1966, the CIA became concerned about the public relations impact of the word "terror," and the program was renamed Provincial Reconnaissance Unit. The tactics did not change.

*It's unconventional warfare. The main job of the PRU is to annihilate, to neutralize the VC infrastructure. We kidnap the VC and make interrogation to find out some more information. If the VC shows cooperation, we don't kill him. If he doesn't cooperate, we torture him. It's part of the war.*

Danh did well in the administrative side of the PRU program. Eventually, in 1971, he was named head PRU operative in an important provincial capital. After only a few weeks on the job, a new Vietnamese PRU commander was appointed in Saigon, and Danh was summoned back to headquarters. He was told that he would have to pay the new man about \$1,000 to hold on to his position. He didn't have the money but promised he would pay within two months.

Since I knew that Danh could never have saved that much cash on his PRU salary, I asked him how he intended to raise the \$1,000. He swore he had no intention of raising it by shaking down the local population as the PRUs, brandishing their CIA-furnished weapons, frequently did.

*I could use my position for many things. I could have my wife open a business like feeding troops in a mess hall. Another way is to set an ambush against VC financial cadre and keep the money. If I get VC money, I use it myself.*

Danh never got his chance, however, because the PRU commander refused to wait for the bribe and forced Danh to resign. He picked up a draft-deferrable job with the government and then went to work as an interpreter for the International Commission for Control and Supervision, the body set up by the 1973 Paris accords to supervise the peace that was not at hand. That was where I last saw him five months before the fall of Saigon.

I have no idea what happened to Danh, but I hope he managed to get out of Vietnam. With his PRU service, Danh certainly will be a criminal in the eyes of the PRG—and by the standards of the Geneva convention. Yet, I don't want to see him hurt because I care about him and because I think my country has a responsibility toward him. He followed us, he did everything we said he should, he believed in us, and by his standards we let him down. I have no doubt we never should have promised him anything in the first place, but we did. He should have known better than to get involved with the PRUs, but he didn't.

So I believe we should welcome Danh to this country, if he got out. I will personally vouch for him. And as distasteful as I find some of the other "VIP" evacuees, I believe we must accept them as well. I only hope that General Lansdale is right in saying they will "take to peaceful endeavors quite easily." ■

LEAVING VIETNAM:

# The Others We Forgot

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by Charles Peters

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For years doves said the Vietcong would triumph soon after we withdrew our troops from Vietnam. For years hawks cajoled and pressured the South Vietnamese to join the forces of the free world. Yet no one took the responsibility for planning an exit from Vietnam which would take care of the Vietnamese who had committed themselves to us.

The news clippings tell the story. As late as April 22 of this year—less than two weeks before the final evacuation of Saigon—Lawrence Meyer wrote in *The Washington Post*:

“With time running out in Saigon, the Ford Administration has taken the first steps toward planning for the arrival of Vietnamese refugees. . . .

“The first problem facing the Inter-agency Task Force on Vietnam, established by the White House Friday, is that it has no idea how

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many refugees may be coming to this country. . . .

“When a reporter mentioned the lack of relocation camp sites and other facilities to a member of the task force yesterday, he replied, ‘That’s an academic point. We don’t have that kind of numbers yet.’ According to this official, ‘sites have been suggested,’ but not selected.”

The planning finally started *three* weeks after this story was filed by UPI from Nha Trang:

“Some Americans, holding shotguns, automatic rifles and submachine guns, kept long-time Vietnamese friends from taking the places they had been promised on helicopters flying from Nha Trang today on the way to refuge in Saigon.

“Other Americans fired into the air and beat back pleading Vietnamese who tugged at them desperately and then watched helplessly as the last two evacuation helicopters flew off.