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(U) Cryptologic Almanac 50th Anniversary Series

(U) "Nothing Left to Give Up": SIGINT and the Fall of Saigon, April 1975 (Part II)

(U) In the first part of this article, we examined the situation in South Vietnam at the beginning of 1975. Although Saigon appeared to hold a military advantage over Hanoi, there were serious problems with the effectiveness of its armed forces and their morale. Meanwhile, Saigon, which was tied to President Thieu's policy of no surrender of territory anywhere, had effectively chained its forces to a static defense that left few mobile reserves to counter a major communist assault.

(U) Communist assaults at Song Be and Ban Me Thuot had crushed the ARVN defenses. To consolidate his position and organize a counterattack on Ban Me Thuot, South Vietnamese president Thieu had ordered a withdrawal from Pleiku. But the withdrawal became a flight, and soon the entire Central Highlands fell to the communist troops. The only safe havens were the cities along the coast. They had to hold. Of primary importance was the huge port and military complex at Danang, once an American enclave. Danang also was the location of another DGTS technical center. Its loss could severely cripple the DGTS's effort to support Saigon's military.

(U) Danang would not last long at all. Even as Pleiku was being abandoned, Danang was cut off by PAVN troops advancing south along the coast. ARVN units earmarked to bolster Danang's defenses were ordered south to Saigon. Troops of the ARVN 3rd Division, charged with holding the port, melted away, seizing boats in the harbor by which to escape. The NSA adviser to the Danang Technical Center had been ordered out by the CIA station chief. He left his personal belongings and boarded one of the last commercial flights out - it was that close.

(U) Meanwhile, the NRV organized a flight of two cargo planes into Danang to rescue the site's equipment and Vietnamese employees. On the tarmac of the airfield, amidst the confusion and gunfire, there occurred one of those incidents that would be etched forever in the memories and hearts of the participants. As the Americans loaded pallets of equipment, papers, and other material salvaged from the center, they were approached by a group from the center's workforce. They asked that their families be taken instead of them. With little chance to persuade the South Vietnamese to reconsider, the Americans agreed and loaded the dependent women and children onto the planes. They knew that they would never see their Vietnamese opposites again. "With tears in our eyes," as one NSA employee recalled, "we said goodbye." The planes closed their ramps, taxied down the

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runway and flew to Saigon. Later photoreconnaissance showed that the Vietnamese had returned to the center and had destroyed it rather than surrender it to the advancing PAVN forces.

(U) The focus of the campaign now turned to Saigon. Suddenly, complete victory seemed within the grasp of Hanoi's forces. Unlike in 1972, when the PAVN units seemed hesitant to exploit their initial successes, there would be no letup this time. At the PAVN forward headquarters near Loc Ninh, General Dung was joined by Le Duc Tho, who had negotiated the Paris Peace Accords in March 1973 (and had refused the Nobel Prize jointly awarded him and Henry Kissinger). Tho, riding a motorcycle, arrived to oversee the last stages of the attack. A final offensive, called the Ho Chi Minh campaign, was now drawn up. General Giap sent a message from Hanoi to Dung urging that the PAVN troops be "reckless" and "like lightning."

~~(S//SI)~~ Try as they could, there was little left for the Americans and their Vietnamese counterparts of the DGTS to organize. Over 600 people from the two centers and the numerous tactical units had been lost. Precious equipment was gone. The DGTS's fleet of SIGINT aircraft was down to a mere 11 planes, all vulnerable to the ubiquitous Grail missiles. Equipment could be jury-rigged, and personnel shifted, but there was little that could be accomplished with the resources at hand. To add to the problems, the head of the DGTS went into a period of long depression, locking himself in his office and refusing to come out. Therefore, it was left to one of [redacted] the NRV, to P.L. 86-36 reconstitute the DGTS in Saigon.

~~(S//SI)~~ Meanwhile, the North Vietnamese forces maintained the pressure on Saigon's forces. Even by late March [redacted] had realized that the Saigon regime was going to fall very soon. This presented three new problems: the evacuation of the Americans and their dependents, the evacuation of the key DGTS leadership, and the destruction of all of the cryptologic and COMSEC material left in South Vietnam. Key to these actions was the position of the American ambassador to South Vietnam, Graham Martin. Martin wanted to delay the evacuation of Americans as long as possible, arguing that their departure could adversely influence the South Vietnamese. So Martin refused [redacted] pleas to allow the evacuation to proceed beyond the initial departure of the dependents. The remaining Americans, thirteen, represented some of the most knowledgeable cryptologists in the U.S. SIGINT system. Their continued presence and possible capture represented a potential compromise of immense proportions. It took the intervention of the director, NSA, Lieutenant General Lew Allen, along with the Director of Central Intelligence, William Colby, to convince Ambassador Martin to let this last group leave on 23 April. Eventually, too, the leadership of the DGTS would escape South Vietnam. Most got out just a few days before Saigon fell.

~~(S)~~ Regarding the destruction of COMSEC and cryptologic material and equipment, certain writers, such as James Bamford in Body of Secrets, have claimed that this loss

constituted a major compromise. This simply was not true. All current or sensitive equipment and material had been removed or destroyed by the Americans and South Vietnamese. However, a large amount of material, mostly South Vietnamese codes, ciphers, and keying material was lost. Also, a substantial amount of crypto-equipment, such as M-209 cipher devices and tactical secure speech gear such as the KY-8 (Nestor), was lost. However, an NSA survey correctly assessed the potential for compromise as negligible as a result of these losses. The South Vietnamese crypto-material had no cryptographic relationship to U.S. systems. As for the equipment, it was either vintage, and no longer used by the United States, as in the case of the M-209, or, like the tactical secure speech equipment, many sets had already been lost during the war.

~~(S//SI)~~ By mid-April the evacuation plans were in effect for Americans and key South Vietnamese personnel. A task force assembled off the coast. President Ford ordered a plan for evacuation, Frequent Wind, to be prepared. SIGINT had to answer two questions: What would be the North Vietnamese reaction to the evacuation, and would the South Vietnamese try to interfere with the departing Americans? Cryptologic support consisted of coverage by eight land-based field sites, led by the army station in Thailand. Aerial collection missions started up. The RC-135 (Combat Apple) flights went to 24-hour coverage. The Navy added its P-3 (Big Look) mission on a 16-hour basis. [redacted] flights, which used a modified U-2 (TR-1) reconnaissance aircraft, became an integral part of Frequent Wind. It was used to monitor and relay the rescue helicopter pilot's communications. Analysts at the ground site of the downlink at [redacted] could listen to the American pilots and issue short spot-type reports which were distributed to the Commander-in-Chief Pacific (CINCPAC), Admiral Noel Gayler.

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(U) By 21 April the last bastion before Saigon, Xuan Loc, fell. Five days went by as the North Vietnamese maneuvered units into position for the final assault. On 26 April the final attack began. On 29 April, President Ford ordered Frequent Wind into motion. Over the next day and a half, some 7,000 people were evacuated by helicopter to the task force waiting offshore. By and large, the rescue went without incident. Except for an occasional stray round or missile, the South Vietnamese and North Vietnamese left the helicopters alone. The last contingent of cryptologists, [redacted] and two communicators, left late on 29 April. Ambassador Martin left early in the morning of 30 April. As his chopper pulled away, the pilot broadcast the codeword "Tiger" to announce his departure. In a last bit of irony, the North Vietnamese radio monitors also heard the transmission at the same time and informed General Dung that the American ambassador was gone.

(U) That afternoon, the last president of South Vietnam, Duong Van Minh, surrendered what was left of his administration to a junior officer from the PAVN. "We have been waiting to turn over the government to you," he said. The PAVN officer replied, "You have nothing left to turn over."

~~[(U//FOUO)~~ Robert J. Hanyok, Center for Cryptologic History, rjhanyo, 972-2893s]

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