

IV. Saigon Journal: The Last 15 Days

by Bruce Branson

Organized Seventh-day Adventist medical work in Vietnam began in Saigon during 1955, in a remodeled apartment-hotel on one of the busiest intersections. Despite inadequate facilities, scores of physicians and nurses through the years built a reputation for excellence and Christian concern.

During 1973, the facilities of the former United States 3rd Field Army Hospital were made available to Saigon Adventist Hospital, which contracted (with the assistance of Loma Linda University Faculty of the School of Medicine) to provide medical care for the United States embassy and other American personnel, in addition to the usual heavy load of Vietnamese patients.

In April 1975, Dr. Bruce Branson of Loma Linda University was asked to help provide surgical care at Saigon Adventist Hospital during the developing political and military crisis. With him went Dr. James Simpson, a resident in surgery from LLU.

Dr. Branson's account of their experience follows.

On Friday, April 11, Jim Simpson and I arrived at Saigon's Ton Son Nhut airport. From a tour of duty in 1973, I remembered the familiar long lines of military aircraft stretching for miles along the runways. As we neared the arrival terminal, we caught sight of a group of Australian Air Force cargo planes loading Australian

embassy effects for evacuation to Sydney. This was the first of many signs of steadily deteriorating morale in Saigon.

Harvey Rudisaile, administrator of Saigon Adventist Hospital, filled us in on the situation as he drove us from the airport to the hospital. The collapse of South Vietnam's armies around Hue and Da Nang during the previous few weeks had been so sudden and total a rout that all government services had disintegrated in the general panic. Refugees had begun to trickle into Saigon during the past few days with unbelievably gruesome stories of pillage, rape, executions in public squares and indiscriminate torture by Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Communists.

One of our nurses later confirmed Rudisaile's report. She had been working with her husband in Da Nang when the debacle came. Somehow they managed to get on board one of the refugee barges and stood up on the flat deck for three days without food or water before reaching Cam Ranh Bay. Soon, however, it too was overrun by the enemy and the young couple decided to start out on foot for Saigon. They traveled mostly at night, hiding out during the day from the marauding Viet Cong, the rockets and the artillery. Repeatedly, they stumbled over dismembered corpses, heads, arms and legs hacked off. As she relived the horror, tears streamed down her cheeks, and she sobbed, "If they take over Saigon, we'll all be killed. Where can we go?"

Later that evening of our arrival in Saigon,

Jim and I heard Dr. Stewart Shankel, chief medical officer, recount the still-fresh horror of the crash of the Babylift C-5A Galaxy transporting orphans to the U.S. Saigon Adventist Hospital had received all the injured survivors, coated with mud from the rice paddy where they had been thrown free of the plane as it bounced and skidded and finally crunched to a stop with its lower deck and occupants smashed beyond recognition. Our medical staff, including Drs. G. Stevens, William Taylor and G. Wiesseman, were soon joined by other physicians from the embassy who had heard about the crash over the American Services radio and sped to the emergency room to help out. Within two hours, more than 150 patients had been cleaned up and cared for. Their wounds had been sutured, fractures set and casted and beds found for all. After it was all over, Shankel recalled, he finally realized what had seemed so strange: through all the furious activity he never once heard any of the

children cry. A few days later a moving letter arrived from defense attaché, Major General H. D. Smith, expressing the gratitude of the U.S. Embassy staff. (See box)

For Sabbath School on April 12, the hospital family met together at the hospital chapel which had been constructed by the American Army for the 3rd Field Hospital. Dr. Simpson and I received a warm welcome from Mr. Nghiep, the Vietnamese associate administrator of the hospital. The highlight of the Sabbath School was a report from a South Vietnamese Adventist minister who had just escaped from the Communists in the takeover of Dalat. He and a few believers made their way on foot to the coast, where they hired a boat, but as they were pulling away from the beach, a group of South Vietnamese soldiers came running toward them, brandishing weapons and demanding to be taken on board. Four of the soldiers jumped on, but then the boat was so dangerously overloaded that they turned their weapons back on the other soldiers and prevented them from climbing on board. A very stormy night at sea kept everyone drenched with spray, but the next day they landed at Vung Tau and then made their way to Saigon.

7 April 1975

Mr. Harvey Rudisaile
Seventh-day Adventist Hospital
Saigon, Vietnam

Dear Mr. Rudisaile:

I find it quite difficult to adequately express my personal gratitude and that of my people for the superb medical attention given the surviving victims of the recent air tragedy that deprived us of so many of our friends and the children they were trying to help.

But for the professionalism, devotion and determination of your staff, that tragedy might well have been total in its consequences.

Please accept our undying thanks and our continued good wishes for your continued help to this community.

Gratefully,

(Signed) H. D. SMITH
Major General, U.S.A.
Defense Attaché

Sabbath afternoon Harvey Rudisaile drove us across the Saigon River to a branch Sabbath School on the road to Bien Hoa, the great Vietnamese Air Force base. The bridge over the river was heavily guarded at both ends and just beyond the bridge was a pair of roadblocks set up half a mile apart, forcing cars to go through a zigzag maze single file and slowing traffic to a crawl. Saigon was obviously preparing for a siege of the city and trying to prevent enemy tanks from using the main road.

A few miles farther out of town we arrived at a disabled veterans' village, where evangelistic meetings had been held a few months before and a church established. We found a church building and a "Lamb Shelter" for the children's Sabbath School. One of the hospital workers was leading the children in a song service as we arrived. It was a moving experience to hear the strains of "Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world; red and yellow, black and white, all are precious in His sight; Jesus loves the little children of the world."

On our way back to town through the road-blocks and across the heavily guarded bridge, we wondered how long we would be able to make Sabbath trips out to the village. The city was rife with rumors. Some hoped that a coalition government could be set up which would allow life to go on more or less the way it had been. Others felt President Thieu would never agree to such an arrangement. Most felt that Saigon could hold out under siege for three months or more, especially if the United States Congress voted the \$450,000,000 President Ford had requested for humanitarian aid for South Vietnam.

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The military situation, of course, remained critical. The few stragglers from the demolished armies of the North were being kept in segregated camps away from Saigon in order to prevent their shattered morale from spreading to the rest of the army. Communist forces were sweeping down, overrunning province after province, meeting only occasional token resistance. Now, the defenders of the city were outnumbered two to one by forces with superior firepower and weaponry and unlimited captured American supplies and ammunition—and with the scent of victory in their nostrils.

During the previous two weeks, families and wives of all but two of the American missionaries had been sent out of the country to Singapore or the U.S. All the men had then moved for safety into apartments immediately adjacent to the hospital and guards were posted at all street gates night and day. One of the persistent worries was the possibility of a breakdown in metropolitan control, with civil disorder, rioting and

attacks on Americans in the city. The panic in Da Nang had taken an ugly anti-American turn at the last. With an eye toward this contingency, the U.S. embassy in Saigon kept up a steady soothing stream of pronouncements on the American Services radio and in releases to the press, hoping to keep the populace calm.

In a curious and unforeseen way, this policy of the embassy had restricted the options open to the administration of Saigon Adventist Hospital. Just a week before Jim Simpson and I arrived in the city, the medical staff at the hospital had decided, in view of the critical military and political deterioration, that perhaps the time had come to evacuate American personnel while there was still a chance to do so in an orderly fashion. Within a matter of hours, the deputy ambassador and Dr. Dustin, chief medical officer of the U.S. embassy, came out to the hospital and pointed out that any such move would become known immediately throughout the city and inevitably would be interpreted as a sign that the Americans were pulling out, possibly setting off uncontrollable panic. Some expressed the uncomfortable feeling that the embassy was being unduly influenced by President Thieu's policies and that the Saigon Adventist Hospital staff and other Americans in the city were being held, in essence, as hostages by both countries. The staff was assured, however, that if evacuation became necessary, the hospital staff would not be forgotten and that provision would be made for both American and key Vietnamese personnel. When pressed for details, the embassy men became somewhat vague and indefinite, pleading the need for secrecy.

The next morning, Sunday, April 13, was taken up by a busy session of heavy surgery. We worked along with Dr. Hieu, a Vietnamese physician, whose father and grandfather had been murdered by the Communists. He and Dr. Dinh helped cover the emergency room at night, while Dr. Cao worked in the large outpatient clinic along with the other American physicians. The inpatient load was off somewhat; it seemed not many were anxious to undergo elective surgery in such uncertain times.

Along with all other schools in the city, our school of nursing had been closed at the beginning of April. This meant a reduced corps of

nursing staff on the wards, except for a few girls whose families were now behind enemy lines and had nowhere to go. Our regular full-time nursing staff remained stable and loyal through this period. If the Americans should be forced to leave, they and the three Vietnamese physicians would have to run the hospital. How we wished we had more Vietnamese Adventist doctors. It was painfully obvious that American medical missionaries, while usually welcome, could rapidly become a liability during periods of rapid political and military change. It brought home to us how important it is to train national professionals in all areas of the ministerial, educational, publishing and medical work. Americans can always be available for brief periods of consultation, refresher courses, retreats and spiritual and professional brotherhood; but more and more areas of the world are becoming off-limits to the American and European missionary.

In our dilemma, we considered another potential source of help—the clinical faculty of the recently established Minh Duc School of Medicine, sponsored by the World Council of Churches. Their medical students, 16 at a time, were already rotating through Saigon Adventist Hospital for some of their clinical experience and instruction, under an affiliation program Dr. Shankel had helped to work out with their school administration. They would help to continue a Christian orientation and witness, while our chaplain and nursing staff might maintain an Adventist presence. Little did we realize at the time that practically the entire faculty of the Minh Duc Medical School would find a way to escape the country, and what they considered almost certain death at the hands of the Communists.

By the end of our first weekend in Saigon and after a round of conferences with the American and Vietnamese staff, a general consensus was reached concerning the circumstances under which the American staff would evacuate, namely: 1) direct orders from the American embassy; 2) orders from the Southeast Asia Union Mission of Seventh-day Adventists or other church authorities; 3) formal representation by three or more responsible officials of our Vietnamese mission national ministers to the effect that our presence might be endangering their lives and their ability to function. Any one or a combination of these eventualities would be

a sufficient cause for immediate evacuation from the hospital of all Americans.

As Sunday evening wore on and we got past the nine o'clock curfew, the noise and din of the traffic past the hospital subsided and we all went up to the rooftop veranda of our apartment building to cool off from the heat of the day. Gradually, but with increasing frequency, we began to hear rumbles and thumps, sounding like distant thunder. Sometimes they came as often as every minute or so. We thought perhaps we might be in for a tropical storm, but Shankel assured us that it was only rocket and artillery shells exploding in the distance. It reminded me of the air raids I had gone through in the Middle East during World War II; Dr. Taylor said it reminded him of the troubles in East Africa during the Mau Mau rebellion. And so we fell to comparing wars in other years in other parts of the world. One thing we agreed on: the eerie surface calm that seemed to prevail in the city. By day commerce and trade flourished downtown; by night the city was ablaze with light—not the slightest sign of a blackout, the usual mark of a real war, in my mind. Still, those thumps and rumbles were real enough.

Monday, April 14, was another busy day in the operating room, while the clinic overflowed with outpatients. We were beginning to see a great many functional complaints—headaches, backaches, nervousness, insomnia, a feeling of tightness in the throat, constant fatigue. There were increasingly frequent requests for large amounts of barbiturates and tranquilizers. Finally, one of the nurses tipped me off: people all over town, some even amongst our own Adventist community, were calmly planning to commit suicide, as families, if the Communists should come in. As one young woman told me, “I don’t mind dying, but I can’t stand the thought of the prolonged torture. If I’m going to have to die, I’d just as soon die in my sleep.”

Later that night, about 11:30, the whole city was awakened by a series of loud explosions which rattled windows and shook floors all over town. A dull orange flare rose on the horizon toward the northeast in the direction of Xuan Loc, a provincial town a little over 35 miles

northeast of Saigon where a battle had been raging for several days. The next morning, we discovered that the explosions had actually come from Bien Hoa, 14 miles away on the road to Xuan Loc. Apparently, a series of ammunition dumps had blown up and the word went around that it was the work of Viet Cong infiltrators.

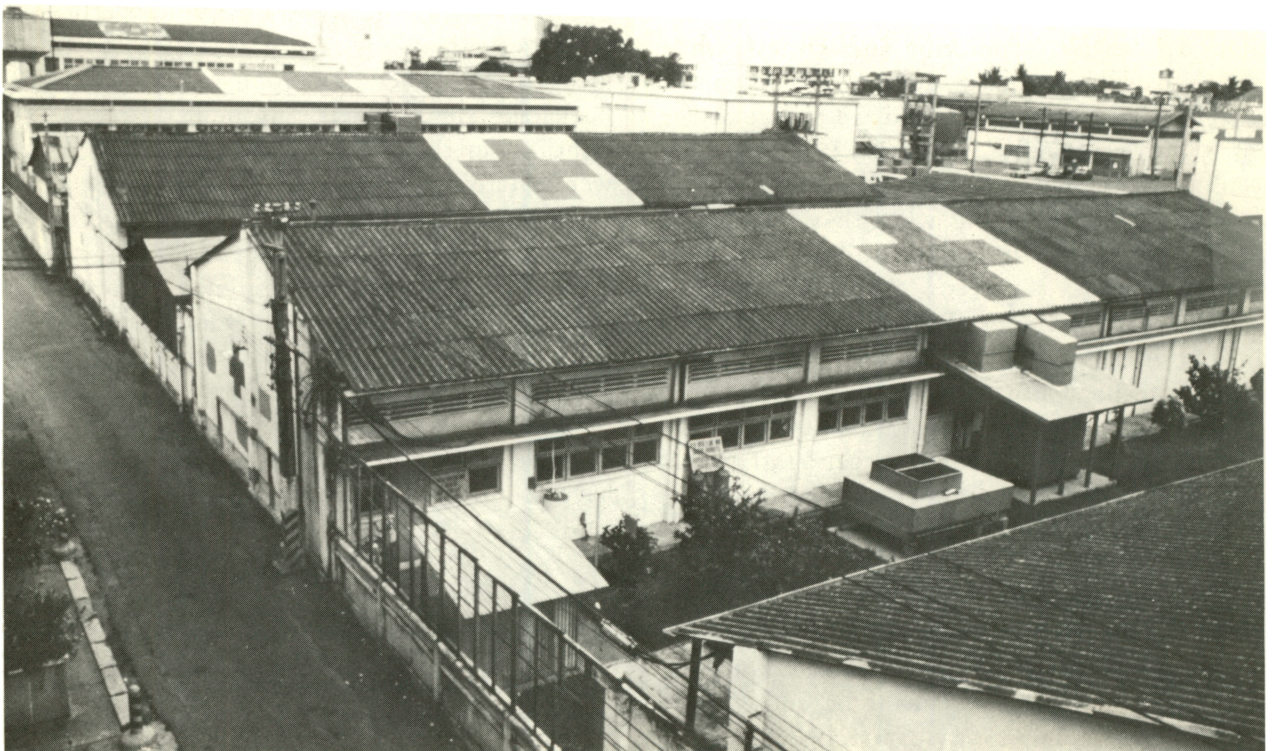
Tuesday, April 15, was a hot, humid day. After morning clinic, I took a hospital car over to the Holt Children's Services, which had been one of the main agencies responsible for the large Babylift flights of the previous two weeks. My wife Betty and many others in the Loma Linda University School of Medicine Women's Auxiliary had been supporting over a hundred mixed American-Vietnamese orphans whose GI fathers had abandoned them. There were recurring reports of mixed-blood orphans in the overrun North being annihilated by the Viet Cong. We hoped we might be able to save some of the children we had been helping and get them out of the country, if their mothers were willing to let them go.

But it was not to be. The South Vietnamese government put a crushing list of requirements

on anyone trying to take a child out of the country who had not already been processed through one of the regular agencies. Our Vietnamese pastor helping with the program was also becoming very apprehensive—the Viet Cong had just broadcast a warning that anyone engaged in any way in the adoption of Vietnamese or half-Vietnamese children by Americans would be put on the blacklist for execution. The pastor gave his report vivid emphasis by drawing a savage line across his neck.

We were confronted by a difficult ethical question: would it be right to try to save the children, if in the process we might be risking the lives of the adults left behind? And, in any case, is it better to raise a Vietnamese child as an Adventist in the United States, away from his own culture, or to try to raise him as an Adventist in Vietnam under Communism?

Questions of ethics, questions involving moral decisions, were beginning to crop up all the time. People were beginning to get desperate. One of our most experienced nurses decided she simply *had* to leave. But to get a passport she would need U.S. \$10,000 to bribe the appropriate government officials. She had already been given



The former Saigon Seventh-day Adventist Hospital.

enough money for her Pan American plane ticket by a previous missionary surgeon who was trying to help any way he could. But that passport money was impossible. Then she heard that dependents of Americans could get a passport for only \$100 bribe—and the rest of her plan took shape at once. One of our American lab technicians agreed to marry her for as long as might be necessary to get her to the United States as an American dependent. Only after the marriage did she find out that it would still take four weeks to get her passport. Would there be that much time?

Meanwhile, the battle for Xuan Loc was reaching a peak. The Saigon *Post* spoke of a great victory, with pictures of scores of Communist dead, but the 11 p.m. BBC news was more ominous. The short wave Radio Nederland from Amsterdam, the BBC, and the Voice of America seemed to be our most reliable and up-to-date sources as to what was happening outside the city. Local papers and radio, including

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the American Services Network, usually gave out only optimistic news or else remained silent.

The next day, Wednesday, was different. After another heavy morning of surgery and clinics, we had just finished lunch and turned on the radio for the one o’clock news in time to hear the announcement of the fall of Xuan Loc. President Thieu had thrown half the defense force for Saigon into that battle and had lost. Of course, there was still Bien Hoa, the huge airbase 14 miles from Saigon. Perhaps the South could form a new line and hold things stable there for a while longer.

During the afternoon, two of our workers approached me and asked me to adopt their chil-

dren. They would probably never see the children again, but they preferred that to seeing them shot or reared as Young Communist soldiers. The unspeakable anguish of the parents was hard to take emotionally, particularly as I could hold out little hope. The strong stand by the government would make it impossible to get the children out through the emigration officials, even if one were to resort to bribery.

Prayer meeting that night was a grim affair.

For some, there was an oppressive feeling that somehow the Devil had gained the upper hand and there was never going to be an end to the bloodshed and slaughter. But we all prayed that God would give us wisdom to find our way through the perils that surrounded us.

After the meeting, there was a spirited discussion among the American missionaries about the conflict between the need for continuing national leadership in Vietnam after the Communist takeover and the nationals’ natural anxiety to save their lives and the lives of their children by finding some way out of the country. During the week, a cable arrived from Elder S. J. Lee in Taiwan, pleading with the national brethren to leave at once and not try to stay on under the Communists. He had been one of the Chinese Adventist ministers left behind when the Communists swept into Shanghai and through his years in prison realized how little he had been able to do for the work. Nearly all the national ministers were either imprisoned or shot. New leaders had to come up from the ranks but, of course, most were forced to go underground.

During the rest of the week, the military situation steadily worsened. Roads to the Delta were cut by the Communists one by one and the main road west toward Cambodia and Thailand was severed. Fresh fruit and vegetables would now be very difficult to get into the city and prices in the market doubled every other day. By Friday, we learned that all American doctors at the University of Saigon Medical School under the American Medical Association overseas program had quietly left on commercial flights. We also learned that Poles, Hungarians and Iranians on the International Commission for Control and Supervision were planning to leave Saigon on the following Tuesday.

In the emergency room, we were beginning to see gunshot wounds in the civilians traveling on roads outside the city. Snipers were coming closer and closer. A power plant on the other side of town was attacked by Communist commandos who then retired with minor casualties. Two reporters came in with their backs covered by shrapnel wounds, sustained while they were crouching in a trench at the battle just outside Bien Hoa. The Voice of America on short wave from San Francisco reported that President Ford and Secretary Kissinger had ordered the evacuation of the 15,000 Americans left in the city . . . but no word came from the embassy. Dr. Dustin and others hinted at an internecine battle going on within the embassy between the ambassador, holding out for some miracle, and junior officials urging an immediate evacuation of nonessential Americans and big-risk Vietnamese. At the American PX, shelves were practically clean. Prices had been cut in half and then in half again. The Vietnamese piaster was falling in value daily. Any national with any hope of getting out was trying frantically to buy U.S. dollars, some offering miniature gold bars at \$60 an ounce, while the going rate on the London market was near \$180 an ounce. It was probably the only place in the world where the value of the American dollar was climbing daily.

Friday night flares and tracer bullets from the far side of Ton Son Nhut airport were heavier than usual and the roar of helicopters and fighter planes overhead was nearly continuous. Now and then small arms fire from the other side of town would erupt briefly. It was clear that we were surrounded and that the enemy was very close. What was holding off the final attack?

On April 19 during Sabbath School, I was called to the emergency room for a long-distance phone call from Dr. David Hinshaw, dean of the School of Medicine at Loma Linda. He wondered if we were getting accurate information as to the military situation and whether we realized how precarious our situation really was. He was particularly alarmed because the U.S. Congress had made it clear there would be no permission for any American troops to go in to save Saigon.

Wives and families of our American missionaries were understandably becoming most

anxious about the safety of their men in Saigon. There had been consultation with division headquarters in Singapore and a decision had been reached that the Loma Linda contingent should leave as soon as possible; in an orderly fashion we were to turn the hospital over to the Vietnamese. I told Dr. Hinshaw that we were rapidly coming to a similar conclusion and that we would leave as soon as we could make proper arrangements.

Sabbath afternoon, Dr. Dustin came over from the embassy and told us we should plan immediately to cut our staff down to two doctors and that even those two should be ready to leave in a very few days. Then he asked for an anesthesia mask and drugs. We must have had very puzzled expressions on our faces as he walked out the door carrying the equipment, but he gave no explanation. Suddenly, we all remembered how fond he was of his pair of pet dachshunds. There was no way he could take them with him, but at least they wouldn't suffer.

Sunday, April 20, Elders R. S. Watts and Don Roth flew in from the union office in Singapore and confirmed the union and division decision reported by Dr. Hinshaw, to cut down on the staff as rapidly as possible. After a brief meeting, it was decided to go by stages. Dr. Shankel and Dr. William Taylor would go with the first group. The two went over to the American Defense Attache Office (DAO) at Ton Son Nhut airport to check out a rumor that an American airlift had actually begun. They soon came back with the news that any American and any dependents of Americans could go over to the airport and sign up for air transportation to Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines. Vietnamese passports and exit visas would not be required. Then we remembered the nurse who had married the American—a bona fide dependent! The husband had already left the previous week, but Dr. Taylor offered to be her escort, while Dr. Shankel offered to sign on several of the student nurses as his dependents.

We clustered around to scrutinize the required affidavit: "I, an American citizen, Passport No. _____, hereby certify that the following named persons are my dependents and that I will assume all financial responsibility for

their travel and resettlement costs." No proof of adoption or marriage was required and we soon found that the term "dependent" was very loosely defined and rarely investigated. How many could each American take? That, too, proved to be a very flexible matter. Now would come the harrowing decisions as to which Vietnamese should go. Over the weekend, several Americans who had previously worked at

"Suddenly, they refused to let Judge Hao aboard. I began shouting loudly in English that he was to go with me and thrust my American passport under the policeman's nose. The crowd kept pushing us against the open door of the bus. Finally, the policeman gave up. It was a close call."

the hospital returned to Vietnam on their own to try to see if they could help with the evacuation; Dr. Terry Schmunk, formerly in charge of the dental clinic, was one, and Dr. Fred Lowe, a recent graduate of the medical school at Loma Linda, also came over to try to get his mother-in-law and the rest of his wife's family. Every American passport would help.

On Monday, April 21, Elder Watts, president of the Union Mission, met with the hospital medical and administrative staff and with Pastor Giao, the newly elected president of the local mission. The question to be decided was the future of the church's health care program in Vietnam. In view of the necessity for the Americans to leave, much of the responsibility would now rest with our Vietnamese leaders. We asked them to give an answer by the following morning, so that the doctors would know how to plan in discharging patients from the hospital, if necessary.

Later, Elder Watts reported on his visit to the embassy where he had been told that Vietnamese employees should set up a telephone communication network, manned 24 hours a day, so as to be able to reach the entire community of Adventists and hospital workers who might be slated for evacuation. Everyone should

be packed and ready to leave on one hour's notice. Accordingly, telephones in the hospital administrator's office immediately became a command post, manned round the clock.

During the day, we received a call from the embassy requesting that any patients in the hospital who were Americans should be sent by air ambulance through their Medical Evacuation (MEDEVAC) system to the Philippines. We had several patients in this category and when we found that we could send two nursing attendants with each patient, Jim Simpson took on the task of assigning Vietnamese in white uniforms to go with the patients. There was no shortage of volunteers, but before long we were running short of patients with whom we could send out refugee attendants. As time went on, though, inventive minds would find a way around this difficulty.

That night Fred Lowe said he had arranged for his family group to leave the next day, but there were more than he could comfortably handle through the lines at the airport so since I was not on emergency call at the hospital the following day I agreed to go with him. We arranged to take Judge Hao and his family. The judge had a son in medical school at Loma Linda and people with relatives in America were generally agreed to face great risk from the Communists.

So the next morning we all drove over to Ton Son Nhut airport. When we got to the main gate, we discovered the Vietnamese police were making everyone get out of their cars while checking their identity cards, before allowing them on busses to the DAO compound for processing. They let Fred Lowe and his group on the bus and then the women in my party, but suddenly they refused to let the judge board. I showed the armed policeman my affidavit indicating all the names listed as Branson dependents, but he shouted menacingly at the judge and shoved him away. In desperation, I wedged myself between them, began shouting loudly in English that he was to go with me and thrust my American passport under the policeman's nose. The crush of the crowd behind kept pushing us all more and more tightly against the open door of the bus until finally, in frustration, the policeman gave up and allowed the judge and me to squeeze onto the bus. It was a close call.

The rest of the morning was spent going through the long lines of Americans with their Vietnamese dependents out in the broiling tropical sun inside the relative safety of the DAP compound. We had to clear the names through various consular officials and then through the airplane passenger manifest. There was plenty of time to get a little better acquainted with the judge. He had originally fled from the North and in beautiful French he mused about what future he might be facing in America. As chief judge of the appeals court in Saigon, he was a symbol of the best in Vietnamese society. Now he would probably have to depend for a living on his eldest daughter, a dentist who was with us.

I thought back to the evening a few days before when some of us from the hospital had been invited to the judge's home for dinner. We had had a delicious multicourse meal of Vietnamese food, superbly prepared and served on beautiful china, in a room furnished with exquisite lacquered furniture covered by silk brocade. But now his home, his car, his position all had to be left behind.

During the day, the Vietnamese mission leaders came back with the decision that they would like to try to keep the hospital going a little while longer, but at a reduced occupancy, handling only emergencies. They also quite

sensibly stated that with all the pressures of the siege, they felt they could function more efficiently if they did not have to worry about the safety of their wives and children. So Don Roth from the division office in Singapore volunteered to escort them to the Philippines. Since the group included three pregnant women, two nurses volunteered to go along, just in case there might be an obstetrical emergency.

Wednesday evening Don and his group of 36 went by hospital ambulance over to Ton Son Nhut and went through the same gruelling hours of processing we had experienced the day before. Finally, they got on the bus to the waiting airplane. A policeman got on board, saw one of the teen-aged sons of the mission president, and motioned for him to come forward. He looked over the boy's identity card, found that he was of military age, smiled knowingly at Roth, then motioned the boy back to his seat. As the bus approached the aircraft, an ARVN soldier got on and, standing next to Roth, said in perfect English, "U.S. money for the policeman and me or else the boy does not get on the plane." Don quickly produced a U.S. \$10 bill—and with a smart salute the soldier waved them all on board the plane.

Meanwhile, I returned to the hospital. George Wieseeman, Jim Simpson and I, the only remaining American physicians, were discharging as many patients as we could and transferring the others to nearby Vietnamese hospitals. We were



Waiting for the plane at Ton Son Nhut Airport on the night of the exodus.

able to get our in-patient count down from 120 to about 60, a more manageable level for the three of us to handle, along with the three Vietnamese doctors.

One of our biggest problems was how to cope with the continual pleas by hospital employees for help in getting them and their families out of the country. Every few steps down the corridor someone would ask, "Please, Doctor, can you help me to live, can you save my children?" Jim was getting as many out as he could through the MEDEVAC system, but it was slow going. And if each American tried to hand-process eight to ten apiece through the lines at the DAO, it would take days and days.

But we didn't have that much time. The news came through that the air base at Bien Hoa had fallen to the enemy, and that infiltrators were just a few miles on the other side of Ton Son Nhut airport.

Early Thursday morning, April 24, I was awakened by two Vietnamese doctors. They said they had contacted an American who promised to get both of them with their families through the lines at the airport and onto an evacuation plane. They said goodbye and left immediately. I found Elder Watts and we quickly realized there would now be no chance of trying to keep the hospital going without any Vietnamese physicians. During the previous night, the mission folk had worked out a list of 175 workers and families who should have top priority, should it become necessary to evacuate. The choices were an agony. A bit of Scripture came to mind—"One shall be taken and the other left." It was like a parable of the last days.

The final moment of decision came and Elder Watts went down to the embassy to see if he could get permission for those Americans left at the hospital to take out the 175 Vietnamese as a group. Within a matter of hours, he had the following letter:

"TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN 24 April 1975

The attached manifests are dependents of individuals who have been closely associated with U.S. Forces. Because of this close association with us, their lives may be endangered.

(Signed) H. D. SMITH, JR.
Major General, U.S.A.
Defense Attaché"

It was the same General Smith who had written the April 7 letter after the Babylift air tragedy. We were beginning now to see answers to our prayers and a way to help get out the Vietnamese whose lives were in so much danger.

All Thursday we discharged patients and finally got down to six; these were transferred the next morning. No patients would be abandoned or left uncared for. But it was a melancholy experience to walk through ward after ward, through the operating room and the intensive care unit, and see no patients, no nurses. It was the end of an era. Mr. Nghiep, the associate administrator, closed the gates of the hospital and guards were posted around it to forestall looting and rioting.

Late Thursday afternoon the largest MEDEVAC contingent was sent out. MEDEVAC control officers had contacted us to say they had colleagues in Saigon who were collecting a group of patients, physicians and nurses from another hospital to be sent to the Philippines. There were not enough patients to go around, so some of the others agreed to let us put on casts and bandages, hook up unconnected intravenous solutions and form a realistic group of "casualties" to make it easier to get through the Viet-

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namese police at the gates to Ton Son Nhut airport. At 6 p.m., they roared out of the hospital gates with sirens screaming and red lights flashing in a ten-ambulance cavalcade with eight "patients" and attendants in each vehicle. Altogether, during those last two or three days, Jim Simpson took out over 100 people through the MEDEVAC route who might not have been saved any other way. We were reminded of

Rahab and the stalks of flax she used to hide the spies in Jericho, and we were comforted by Paul's inclusion of Rahab's name among the list of those whose faith would save them.

By 8 p.m., the 175 on the list had gathered at the dispatching area of the hospital. We had waited till after curfew time to lessen the chances of being held up by crowds at the gates of the airport. There were poignant farewells to relatives staying behind; then as soon as each ambulance was loaded, an American would climb in beside the driver, ready to wave his magic passport to the guards at the airport gates.

By 10 p.m., we had all arrived at our staging area in the DAO compound. It was a stretch of concrete sidewalk about 200 feet long which had been reserved for our exclusive use. Soon fatigue set in and one by one we stretched out on the concrete, heads on bags or suitcases, and tried to sleep. Thousands of people were waiting in the DAO area for their turn to come up on the passenger lists. Hours passed and it was high noon of Friday, April 25, the next day, before we finally boarded the bus to go out to the C-141 Starlifter that would take us to Guam. Planes had been coming in and leaving hour after

hour, night and day and the crews were becoming fatigued but to all of us they seemed kind, strong and reassuring.

There were a few bucket seats, but most of the 180 or so on our plane sat on blankets on the metal floor, as the huge rear cargo door clanged shut and was secured. During the steep lift-off, we all began to slide toward the rear, but outstretched hands from those in the bucket seats along the sides kept us from piling up in a heap. On many of the planes, the side doors were kept open until the planes had reached 20,000 feet, while a marine stood with an automatic rifle, ready to shoot out tracer flares if he saw any heat-seeking missiles aimed toward a plane's hot jet engines, in the hope that the flares would decoy the missiles away from the plane. None of the planes were shot down.

We were cheered that so many of our high risk national mission workers had been saved, yet our hearts ached for those left behind. For them, too, a new life has begun under radically changed conditions.

Although Saigon Adventist Hospital is no more, the good that its workers did through the years will live on in the hearts of those who caught a glimpse of the tender regard and love of the Great Physician.



Aboard the C-141 Starlifter on the way to Guam from Saigon.