

## **(U) Cryptologic Almanac 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Series**

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

(U) On 30 April 1975, the city of Saigon, capital of South Vietnam, fell to the forces of the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN). This event marked the end of a struggle to reunify Vietnam begun in September 1945 by the nationalist-communist party, the Viet Minh, under Ho Chi Minh. The United States had been involved since 1950, first helping the French, without success, to hold onto their Indochina empire, and then itself militarily intervening in 1965. In January 1973 the United States had signed a peace agreement with North Vietnam, which allowed Washington to withdraw from the conflict. However, no one in Hanoi or Saigon believed that there was any chance of a permanent peace; both sides grimly prepared for the final struggle.

(U) By the end of 1974, after almost two years of intermittent clashes between both sides to gain better military and political advantage, Hanoi came up with a plan to end the struggle. It called for a large-scale assault in the strategically vulnerable Central Highlands of South Vietnam. Some leading politicians in Hanoi were concerned about an American intervention, especially with air power. (U.S. air strikes had played a major role in blunting North Vietnam's spring 1972 offensive.) So a scaled-down version was substituted. A three-phase offensive would begin at the end of 1974. A limited attack along the Cambodian-South Vietnam border would start in December. A second phase would commence in March 1975 in which the North Vietnamese would seize a number of outposts in the highlands. Then the northerners would consolidate their position during the rainy season. By the end of 1975 they could start the final push that hopefully would end in victory in the spring of 1976. However, the North Vietnamese minister of defense, General Vo Nguyen Giap, allowed for the chance that a "strategic opportunity" would arise. If so, he said, then the PAVN had to be ready to exploit it.

(S) In the United States, the consensus was that Hanoi was planning a final offensive. A CIA Special National Intelligence Estimate, issued in late December 1974, asserted this possibility. It also anticipated that the communists might press for a final victory if conditions seemed propitious, committing its strategic reserve for the final attack. This was a sobering assessment of Hanoi's intentions. What no one could predict was Saigon's resilience in the face of the expected attacks. Although Saigon's forces outnumbered Hanoi's in almost all significant categories, such as men, artillery pieces, and aircraft, the regime was politically weak. The Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) was better than most critics would concede; but it was a military with a history of dependence on U.S.

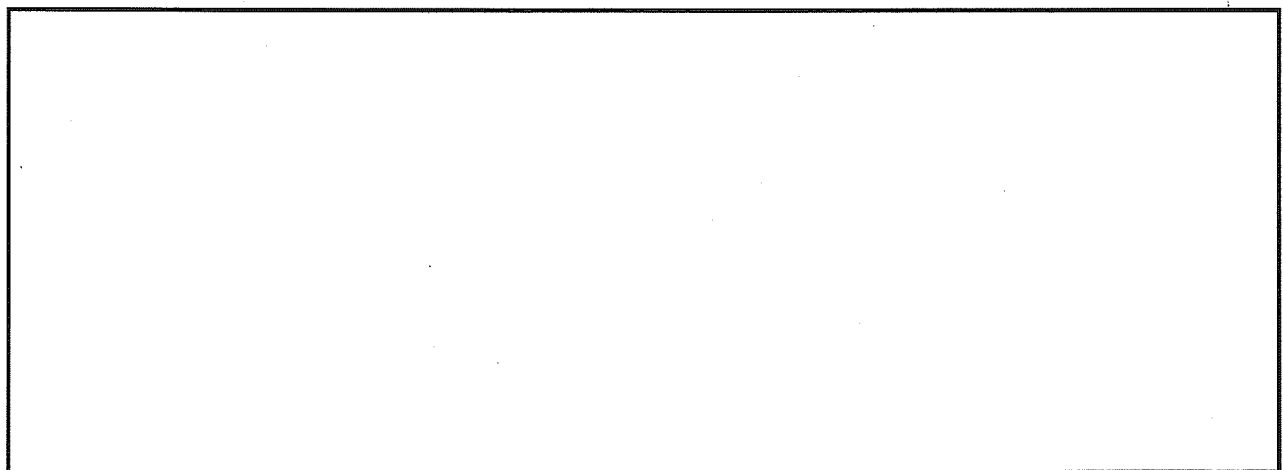
air support and advisors. In this battle, neither would be present. Also, Vietnam's president, Nguyen Van Thieu, had committed to a strategy of complete defense of all areas. This, in effect, tied down almost all of Saigon's forces to a static defense. Hanoi's forces were free to pick the time and place of attack.

(U) In Washington the Ford administration and Congress were in no mood to re-intervene in future fighting. Congress had limited the amount of military aid to 700 million dollars. Critics claimed this was not enough, but only half of this amount would be spent by the time Saigon fell. In his January 1975 State of the Union address, President Gerald Ford did not even mention Vietnam, despite then ongoing fighting. In a press conference a few days later, he said that he could see no reason to intervene.

~~(S//SI)~~ By this time, Vietnam had become a target of secondary concern to American SIGINT. It had been displaced by a strategic interest in the People's Republic of China. The last major field site in the region, the Army Security Agency's site at Ramasun, Thailand, saw most of its tactical intercept support resources removed in favor of

[REDACTED] From a high of nearly 8,000 cryptologists in late 1969, there were fewer than 100 in 1975 left in South Vietnam.

[REDACTED] EO 1.4.(c)  
[REDACTED] Their mission was restricted to advice and logistical support. Three people served as technical advisors to the South Vietnamese SIGINT organization's field stations, known as technical centers, in Saigon, at Pleiku, in the Central Highlands, and Danang, which was along the coast. But there were no U.S. SIGINT assets in South Vietnam. The only support that could be mustered consisted of the occasional aerial intercept mission such as Combat Apple [REDACTED] and some coverage from the field station at Ramasun, Thailand.



~~(S//SI)~~ In December 1974 the North Vietnamese began their offensive. They surrounded the provincial capital of Song Be. Within a few days the city fell. The lack of a strong South Vietnamese effort to defend the city and the nonintervention by the Americans

convinced the North Vietnamese leadership to go for a larger prize in the Central Highlands. Also, the battle established some dangerous precedents/

[REDACTED] and the extremely effective battlefield work of Hanoi's own tactical COMINT units known as Technical Reconnaissance Units (TRU).

EO 1.4.(c)

(U) Hanoi now set its sights on the Central Highlands. Two cities were logical targets: Ban Me Thuot and Pleiku. The communist military planners chose to take Ban Me Thuot, which was south of Pleiku. By taking this city, a communications hub, the North Vietnamese would have the options of attacking north or to the east and threaten to cut South Vietnam in half. Hanoi had to somehow distract the South Vietnamese military, to convince them that their main attack was aimed at Pleiku. To accomplish this they had to deny Saigon (and American intelligence) access to information that would reveal the communist plan. The North Vietnamese devised a deception plan. One division would "demonstrate" near Pleiku and Kontum by maneuvering in the open and generating much radio traffic. Meanwhile, three more divisions would silently move into place around Ban Me Thuot. One of the units, the North Vietnamese 316th Division, had to move south almost 500 miles from central North Vietnam through Laos and across the mountains to south of Ban Me Thuot. Could the communists avoid detection and pull off a surprise?

~~(S//SI)~~ In the end they succeeded. Although some aspects of the plan were compromised by defectors and prisoners from the communist side, the South Vietnamese commander of the region was convinced that Pleiku was the main target. In part, this assessment was

[REDACTED] Meanwhile, the TRUs, exploiting the South Vietnamese communications, kept the North Vietnamese forces commander, General Van Tien Dung, fully informed of Saigon's thin defensive posture at Ban Me Thuot.

(U) On 10 March, five PAVN regiments, supported by tanks and assault teams stormed Ban Me Thuot. The next day the city fell, along with a deputy division commander and its communications center complete with radios and cryptomaterial. Desperate to recover the city, the regional commander ordered a counterattack. Two regiments flown in by helicopter landed east of the city. However, they ran into two advancing communist divisions which had been alerted to their presence. The remnants of the ARVN units

retreated to the east. On 14 March, President Thieu and the regional commander met to discuss the strategic situation. A decision was made to withdraw from Pleiku, reassemble those forces and try to retake Ban Me Thuot. Unfortunately, the decision was made without much warning. The next day, the commander and his staff left Pleiku. The main forces were to pull out the next day. Panic set in, and there was a general exodus of civilians and local defense forces. There was only one road out to the east, and communist forces closed on it from north and south.

EO 1.4.(c)

~~(S//SI)~~ Lost in the pell-mell retreat were the personnel of the Pleiku Technical Center. The [redacted] had been withdrawn earlier, as had the center's equipment. But the withdrawal turned into panic-ridden rush, and the site's personnel and dependents had to leave with the refugee troops and civilians. Some 600 left Pleiku on 15 March. Attacked by communist troops, cut off by ambushes, 200 or so survivors managed to reach Danang on the coast.

(U) Events in South Vietnam had reached a crisis stage. The road to the sea was now open. The only defense lay in the coastal cities and Saigon. Could South Vietnam hold on to these places? And, if not, what about the Americans? The major concern for the NRV would soon turn from advice and support of the DGTS to evacuation planning.

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## **(U) Cryptologic Almanac 50<sup>th</sup> 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

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 <sup>P.L.</sup> 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] [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. EO 1.4.(c)

(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. P.L. 86-36

(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."

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