

## Document D (Fall of Saigon)

Saigon, capital city of South Vietnam, fell to North Vietnamese forces on April 30<sup>th</sup> 1975. The fall of Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City) effectively marked the end of the Vietnam War. After the introduction of Vietnamisation by President Richard Nixon, US forces in South Vietnam had been constantly reduced leaving the military of South Vietnam to defend their country against the North. Saigon had already experienced direct military action in 1968 when as part of the Tet Offensive North Vietnamese forces had appeared in Saigon and for a short time had entered the US Embassy. However, brief their incursion may have been, the appearance of North Vietnamese forces in the South's capital had been a shock. By 1975, what remained of the South Vietnamese Army was not capable of withstanding the advance of the North and it was an inevitability that Saigon would fall to communist forces.

On January 1<sup>st</sup> 1975, troops from the PAVN (People's Army of Vietnam) had advanced to within 75 miles from Saigon. Because Saigon was so far to the south, it had effectively escaped major action and damage. Attacks on US targets did occur but usually this was the result of individual attack as an all-out offensive was to all intents out of the question. However, once US forces had left South Vietnam, the advance of the North into the South became unstoppable. As the forces of the North got nearer to Saigon, what remained of the South Vietnamese Army started to disintegrate. The President and Commander-in-Chief, General Thieu, had already fled to Taiwan. General Duong Van Minh who was instructed to find a peaceful solution to the war replaced him. This was an impossible task, as the North had no reason to want to negotiate.

In April the first rockets in nearly ten years landed on Saigon. The city had no defence against them. Following the rocket attacks, the US Ambassador, Graham Martin, made a live appearance on Saigon television where he pledged that he would not disappear in the middle of the night:

"I, the American Ambassador, am not going to run away in the middle of the night. Any of you can come to my house and see for yourselves that I have not packed my bags. I give you my word."

Any evacuation of staff from the US Embassy would prove to be difficult. It could only be done using helicopters and the garden of the embassy was laid out such as to make a landing of large helicopters nearly impossible. Large numbers of personnel could only be catered for using Chinooks or 'Jolly Green Giant' helicopters. The garden had large trees and a swimming pool in the middle of it, which would make a landing very difficult in the best of situations – let alone one in which the approach of large helicopters might have attracted further rocket attacks on Saigon or on the embassy in particular. The helipad on the roof of the embassy could only accommodate small helicopters such as a Huey – far too small to carry out a large number of people.

By April 28<sup>th</sup> North Vietnamese forces were just three miles from Saigon's centre and the city centre was put under a 24-hour curfew. The Americans tried to land two C-130 Hercules transport planes at Tan Son Nhut airport but these were ordered not to land because North Vietnamese forces were so close to the landing strip. The only option was a helicopter evacuation. Trees in the embassy garden were cut down, which gave the large Chinooks and 'Jolly Green Giants' a chance to land. The first to land was a Chinook that took off with 70 people on board – far above its limit. Successive helicopter trips took out of the embassy compound all the Americans who had gathered there. The last Marines were taken out of the embassy by a Bell Huey helicopter via the roof helipad.

North Vietnamese tanks smashed down the gates at the Presidential Palace to accept the surrender of General Minh. By the end of April 30th, South Vietnam was wholly under the control of North Vietnam who swiftly announced the creation of a united Vietnam. Saigon was re-named Ho Chi Minh City.