

29Mar73 7th AF Moves to NKP

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[March 29 at 11:29 PM](#) ·

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7 Air Force command transferred to Nakhon Phanom Royal Thai Air Force Base, Thailand, and accepted dual responsibility as the US Support Activities Group and HQ 7 AF. As a result, 7 AF controlled air assets and operations in Thailand.

US Support Activities Group and HQ 7 AF served in this role until inactivated on 30 June 1975.

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Was the Last Man in Saigon Nursing a World-Class Hangover?

By Don Hirst

Tan Son Nhut Air Base's tarmac was hot and crowded on the morning of March 29, 1973.

Besides the hordes of journalists, there were American troops who soon would board a lumbering C-141 Starlifter, their destination the United States.

They weren't the only military on the scene that morning. Also present, in a situation that was still strange to old Vietnam hands, were members of North Vietnam's army. This time, though, cameras were the only thing they were shooting.

All of this was certainly understandable. After all, it wasn't every day that the last American troops would be leaving South Vietnam.

But was the last American serviceman to leave Saigon on March 29, 1973 really aboard that C-141? Or is there a bit more to that story? Almost 40 years later, I'm still intrigued by the possibility that the latter might be true.

The fall of South Vietnam was more than two years in the future as I stood in the hot sun, watching history unfold. That sad day in American and South Vietnamese history when South Vietnam was overrun by communist forces was an event that wasn't even on the radar screen for most people.

Instead, peace was the order of the day — a time to turn out the last light in the tunnel. About two months before, following the heavy bombing of important North Vietnamese targets by B-52

Stratofortress bombers, North Vietnam finally agreed to a peace treaty with South Vietnam and the United States. The years spent in fruitless negotiations during the Paris Peace Talks finally bore fruit on Jan. 27, 1973 — thanks in no small part to major attacks by America's aerial might on targets that were once off-limits.

For the past few weeks, a frenzy of activity marked the move toward the exits for the dwindling number of American troops still in South Vietnam. Camp Alpha, located at Tan Son Nhut Air Base, was the outprocessing point for the final U.S. contingent. Once the last planeload of American troops left South Vietnamese airspace, there would be only the U.S. Embassy with its U.S. Marine Corps security unit and a beefed-up Defense Attache Office to look out for the United States' interests.

Finally, it was time. The last group of American GIs began to board the C-141. One grizzled senior NCO became the focus of attention as a North Vietnamese soldier tried to present him with a scroll. The American tried to refuse what he obviously felt was a propaganda ploy. Finally, he reluctantly accepted it.

Among the assembled journalists, there was the inevitable quest for what they felt was a significant milestone: the name of the last U.S. serviceman to board the plane. After all of these years of American involvement, with so much emphasis on statistics — body counts, casualties, downed aircraft and other markers — it was inevitable that the pressure was on to document, for print and for broadcast, the last man's name.

When it appeared that the last troop had boarded, one bold journalist — I'm pretty sure it was Joe Treaster of the New York Times — went the extra mile to harvest that nugget of information. He jumped aboard the aircraft and did a quick interview before being ejected from the Starlifter. It was all for nothing. A moment or so later, another serviceman climbed aboard, the doors shut and the plane prepared to taxi to the runway.

During all of this commotion, my eyes wandered. As an Overseas Weekly correspondent, my news peg was a color story on the last days before departure. With a lead time of a couple of weeks until my story would hit print (the paper's main office now was in California, with printing in Asia and a production schedule more like a magazine's) I felt no urgent need for names. I could always get that later.

Taking a wide-angle view of the scene, I noticed something several hundred yards away that piqued my interest. There, across the ramp, was what appeared to be a U.S. Air Force C-130 Hercules. The rear ramp was open and several American airmen, who looked from a distance like armed security police, stood by the plane.

Curious, I decided to discreetly check it out. Nonchalantly moving away from the mob of fellow journalists, I tried to be inconspicuous as I headed toward the C-130. If something else was going on, I wanted to have that potential scoop all to myself. After all, when you have a long lead time after you file a story, you need all the edge you can get.

Luck was on my side. Everybody else was focused on the C-141 and the final moments of U.S. troop presence in South Vietnam. I had whatever was going on here with the mysterious C-130 all to myself.

I wasn't disappointed.

I introduced myself to the airmen. "What's going on?" I asked. The C-141 is way over that way and you're way down this way. That plane is getting ready to leave but you're not really focusing on it. Doesn't look like you're both involved with the same thing.

They weren't. The explanation I got was both interesting and intriguing — and also raised a very tantalizing possibility.

They said they were security police from a base in Thailand — I forget which one was mentioned — and their job was really the final act of the U.S. departure. Their mission, one security policeman told me, was to wait a bit after the C-141 left and then do a sweep through downtown Saigon. They were supposed to make sure no American serviceman had somehow managed to be left behind.

I hung around the C-130 for a bit, engaging in more small talk. I wasn't going to be able to accompany the search team, so I went back to observing the final moments before the C-141 left. Then I headed back to Saigon to do a bit of looking around myself. I was scheduled to fly out in a day or two — most likely never to return — so I wanted to say goodbye to a bunch of favorite places in a city that was once my home. I never did learn the outcome of the C-130's post-departure mission.

So there is a potential asterisk waiting to be affixed to the official record of the final troop pullout. Was the last American to exit South Vietnam really aboard that C-141? Or was the last man in Saigon nursing a world-class hangover when he unceremoniously was loaded aboard that C-130 dispatched to Tan Son Nhut?

I wouldn't rule out the latter. After all, Vietnam was that kind of war.

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Editor's note:

Don Hirst served two extended Army tours in Vietnam and then returned as a civilian photographer/reporter with the Overseas Weekly from 1968 to 1972, returning briefly in March 1973 to cover the U.S. departure. He later was an associate editor with Army Times in Washington, D.C., for more than 11 years and went on to launch Salute magazine, serving as its executive editor for nearly 20 years.