

As we [Can Tho Consulate CIA workers] left the coast and flew toward the Navy ships, the Vietnamese were becoming agitated. We were not going to Tan Son Nhut...The Navy air controller told us to circle between the Navy ships and the shore. ...As we circled, we saw one ship with two distinctive helipads marked on the rear deck, move out from the armada. A radio operator from that ship, the USS Vancouver, came on the guard frequency....Throughout the day we moved KIP offshore...The captain wanted to talk to someone in authority on the helicopter...Marines escorted [CIA man James E. Parker] to the Captains quarters, where he asked again: who authorized this evacuation? Saigon did not...He said that his ship was to be in position in a matter of hours, possible to lead the Navy up the Saigon River to evacuate the embassy. He was not in the CIA-support business or the refugee business. He was going to put us off at another ship, Now. And he was going to go on with his mission...You and those ratty looking people below who know nothing about this themselves. They are below deck demonstrating, trying to attack my Marines. You, my friend, are going to lead those people off my ship. Take your people to this merchant marine ship besides us.

By midday April 30, 1975, we were near the *Pioneer Contender*, which sat amid an assortment of oceangoing vessels, barges, fishing boats, and U.S. Navy ships. The port city of Vung Tau was off to the northwest. When I came alongside the *Pioneer Contender*, the captain welcomed me over his loudspeaker. Soon the rope ladder dropped over the side. After everyone was unloaded we pushed off from the side of the ship.

We went out in the swirling mess of boats and debris. The harbor was ravaged by the war's end. Refugees were clinging to anything that would float, paddling with their hands and pieces of boards, standing in boats, holding children, arms outstretched to us and oceangoing vessels. Oil spills and litter swirled with the tide...Before me was a crowded, chaotic harbor clogged with thousands of hysterical refugees....We went back to the *Pioneer Contender*.

As I turned to leave the bridge I looked around. With the advantage of the *Pioneer Contender's* height, I could see the U.S. Navy ships out at sea, the chaotic harbor, and the beaches crowded with people and personal belongings.

A tug boat under power held a barge against the pier. The press of people reached from the beach to the end of the pier. As the crowd surged forward, some people were pushed into the mass of humanity fighting for space on the barge below. The tugboat crew was unphased and kept the barge steadily braced. The crowd suddenly surged forward again, and more people were pushed off, some falling, screaming, into the water. Two gangplanks were crowded with people slowly making their way onto the barge. Everyone was carrying something--women had children in their arms, men had suitcases, boys bags, soldiers guns. Everyone was pushing frantically, desperately.

Suddenly an artillery round whistled overhead and landed in the middle of the harbor. Then another, as if an enemy gunner was registering his rounds. The people on the gangplank continued to press forward. I saw their mouths open wide in horror when the tugboat reversed its engines and began to pull the barge slowly away from the pier. Men, women and children tried to jump on board, but many were not successful. As the tugboat and barge moved farther away from the shore I could see the people in the water behind them. Slowly the boat and barge turned and started in our direction through the maze of smaller vessels--makeshift rafts, fishing vessels, South Vietnamese Navy lighters.

More shells began to land randomly in the harbor. A U.S. Navy ship moved by us briefly and fired her huge deck guns in the direction of the North Vietnamese gun position, but the ship soon fell back and the incoming rounds continued. A low wail from thousands of desperate people drifted across the

harbor.

Loaded with thousands of Vietnamese refugees, the *Pioneer Contender* heaved anchor early the next morning and pointed her bow east. Vietnam faded behind us.