

Last Plane Out of Saigon

BY RICHARD PENA AND JOHN HAGAN

Richard Pena saw the realities of war while working as an operating room specialist in Vietnam. While he was stationed in that country full of unrest, Pena took it upon himself to learn about the locals—and try to understand why he had flown halfway around the world to help the South Vietnamese people. The Austin-based attorney, who has served as the president of the American Bar Foundation, the State Bar of Texas, and the Travis County Bar Association, was on one of the last planes to exit Vietnam at the war's end. He left on day 61 after the signing of the Paris Peace Accords, which stipulated that America withdraw in 60 days. *Last Plane Out of Saigon* is a reproduction of Pena's thought-provoking real-time journal from that long, final year of the war.

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We do not live in Vietnam—we exist. How can I describe these days of existence when the war has already been acknowledged as a fiasco? Vietnam is no longer called the Southeast Theater, for it had long ago become the Theater of the Absurd. Most American soldiers here act out their various roles, regardless of how illogical and insane, in the hope that the 365 days will soon be over. However, the days are so long, so significant, that we refer to them as “Year Long Days.”

We have our work in the operating room to occupy many of the hours, but none of us can ever forget where we are—we can never forget our homes. A day never goes by without someone bringing up The World, which is what we call America. A minute does not pass without us thinking of it. Instantly, we flash back to little things that seem insignificant to many people—a car ride, a hot bath, a McDonald's hamburger. Words like “civilization,” “morality,” “justice,” and “love” are merely remembered as representations of philosophies that are said to exist. It is these memories of what once was, and perhaps a childlike anticipation of what will someday be, that keep us going throughout these long days.

There are some who were not strong enough to cope with the bad hand they had been dealt by fate. They cannot see tomorrow, perhaps because most of them did not have much of a yesterday. These are the ones that turn to “scag” (heroin) and eventually end up at DETOX (Drug Rehabilitation Center) or with a 212 Discharge (less than honorable).

Others accept their assignments and are content merely to be alive. These are the ones who live, work, and seldom leave the confines of the hospital. They justify it by saying that they are saving money. These two types of people are

the ones who easily submit and accept defeat. To the latter, Vietnam is simply a bad experience, which they will tolerate for 365 days and then return home.

Others are not made to fit into either of these molds. My spirit is too restless, too inquisitive. I have to know more about this war by knowing the people. I have to know what they feel, what they want, and why. After all, we have come halfway around the globe to defend them.

In short, I am determined to learn what cannot be taught through textbooks. By gaining knowledge which few have the opportunity to learn, by expanding my individual consciousness, I am determined to make Vietnam a positive page in my life. It is for this reason that I felt possessed to move out into the Vietnamese community, and I immediately accepted the opportunity to move into a villa with five other OR techs. As Brother Leary very aptly put it, “You owe it to yourself.”

I am astonished by the opportunity that is before me. I have been put in such a unique position. Being assigned to the 3rd Field Hospital is a stroke of luck. We at 3rd Field see a completely different side of war than anyone else in Vietnam. 3rd Field is not a military post, but rather an individual hospital within the Saigon area. As a result, we are not bombarded with the usual barrage of military regulations. Although we seldom see the actual jungle combat of the war, we do see the results of the war in human terms, and we do see the war that is fought in the city. This refers not only to the mangled and maimed brought into the emergency room and operating room, but also to the effect the war has on Vietnamese people.

Rev, one of my many roommates, once brought home a soldier who was assigned at Long Binh. His eyes seemed dazed; he appeared to be in a mild state of shock. “I’ve been in country for six months,” he said, amazingly, “and this is the first time I’ve actually been out with the people. Hell, I haven’t even been off the post in six months. What are they like?” **TBJ**

To learn more about the book, go to lastplaneoutofsaigon.com. Last Plane Out of Saigon (Story Merchant Books), excerpt reprinted by permission of Richard Pena.

