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# Saigon 1945

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At the end of World War II I was in Rangoon serving as a soldier in the U. S. Army assigned to the military intelligence organization called the Office of Strategic Services (OSS). Shortly after the Japanese surrender the OSS sent small teams of officers and men to the principal cities of Southeast Asia. Their mission was partly military (e.g., repatriating American prisoners of war, locating the graves of Americans killed during the war, and investigating war crimes), but in the absence of other representatives of the American government (e.g., the State Department), they also performed some peacetime functions, notably monitoring the political situation.

When I heard that an OSS team was going to Saigon, I went to see the officer in command, Colonel Peter Dewey, and told him I wanted very much to go with him. He was unimpressed when I told him I had studied Vietnamese under the Army Specialized Training Program but asked if I knew French. When I replied that I had learned French at my Belgian mother's knee, he gave me a one-word oral exam: "What is the French word for 'street'?" He was not testing my vocabulary but my pronunciation, for "rue" is one French word few Americans can pronounce properly. Colonel Dewey, who spoke flawless French himself, was satisfied with my pronunciation and said, "All right, you can go. Be ready at 2:30 tomorrow morning."

So on September 4, 1945, we took off for Saigon. But first Dewey pinned second

lieutenant's bars on me. Of the eight OSS men going on the mission I was the only enlisted man and as such would be unable to deal with British and French officers. Similarly, Dewey upgraded the rank of the officers on the mission so that they could deal with French and British colonels and generals. All this was of course unofficial, but the OSS was a very informal organization that readily disregarded inconvenient Army rules and regulations. In Saigon we were to live like civilians, and the military life seemed far away.

Our arrival in Saigon was quite dramatic. We were the first Allied soldiers to land there, and despite the surrender in Japan, we were not at all sure of the reception that awaited us. Southern Indochina was occupied by some 72,000 Japanese troops. Would they accept the surrender? We need not have worried. When we landed at Tan Son Nhut, some fifty of the highest-ranking Japanese officers were lined up on the tarmac waiting to receive us most respectfully. In the coming weeks the Japanese were to do exactly what they were told to do, which often meant serving as police and even at times as soldiers against the Vietnamese, sometimes even under the command of British officers.

Major General Gracey, the British commanding officer who arrived some time after we did, saw it as his mission not only to return southern Vietnam to the French when they were able to take over but meanwhile to put down Vietnamese resistance. Under the terms of the Allied peace accords, Vietnam was divided at the 16th parallel, with the British temporarily in command in the South and the Chinese in the North until such time as French forces could replace them. General Gracey, who was an old-fashioned product of the British Empire, brought with him

colonial troops from India: Gurkhas and Sikhs and Punjabis, the kind of troops that had fought the Japanese and could be commanded to fight the Vietnamese. In all fairness, I must say that some of General Gracey's staff officers, even high-ranking professional soldiers, did not share his views at all.

During our first few days we stayed at the Continental Hotel in the center of Saigon, where we were enthusiastically welcomed by the French residents and introduced to the French colonial way of life. But we soon moved out to a villa on the outskirts of town that had been occupied by a Japanese admiral, and there I spent most of my time during the next two and a half weeks, working with our communications officer, Lieutenant Frost, and our young Thai radio operator who went by the name of Paul. I had been trained as a cryptographer by the OSS, and my primary job was encoding and decoding messages to and from our headquarters in Southeast Asia. Our messages, which were then forwarded to Washington, reported on the activities of our team and on political developments in southern Vietnam. These reports would now make interesting reading and should by rights be available under the U.S. Freedom of Information Act, but to date all attempts to obtain copies have been frustrated. I know they still exist, for I once met an American Foreign Service officer who had read them and who was able to discuss the situation in Saigon in 1945 knowledgeably and with great interest. That was in 1963, yet in 1997, over half a century after we sent our reports, they are still inaccessible.

I do have some documentation of my own in the form of letters home, which my parents carefully preserved. But no letters survive for the period between September 8 and September

25, when I would normally have written two or three times, so I can only conclude that the military censor destroyed those letters because he felt they contained information that should be kept secret. Even though the war was over, the censor was still at work, as I know from passages that were sliced out of other letters. As a rule I was quite "security conscious," as OSS personnel had been trained to be, but in my letters during the period in question I may have reported something of my "clandestine" activities. For it was during this period that I met several times with representatives of the Vietnamese independence movement.

Although I spent most of my time at the villa away from the center of things, I was kept well informed of developments by the members of our team who kept an eye on the doings of the French, the British, the Vietnamese, the Japanese, the Chinese. They were all caught up in the intense atmosphere of intrigue that prevailed in Saigon and all talked about it when they returned to the villa. Colonel Dewey talked to me most of all, and I was impressed by his account of what was going on. He had spent the first year of the war in France, reporting on the political situation and serving as an ambulance driver with the Polish army; then as an OSS officer he had been with the French in North Africa and had parachuted into occupied France, where he had engaged in legendary exploits. But what impressed me most was his interpretation of the complicated political maneuverings of the different individuals and factions represented in Saigon, which he frequently explained to me. He was obviously contemplating a diplomatic career, and he encouraged me to do so too. I was 22 at the time and beginning to think about what I would do after leaving the army.

Dewey had established contacts with the Viet Minh and perhaps other Vietnamese organizations. Because he was well known to the French and the British, both of whom objected to his contacts with "the enemy," he could not very well meet with any Vietnamese without being observed. So he sent me several times to meet with them in the evening. The streets were dark, there were still many former prisoners of war floating about, and I would dress as they did in order to escape notice. I would go to a house on a quiet street and there meet for perhaps two hours with three or four men who were obviously deeply committed to the liberation of their country. I have a very clear memory of those meetings but unfortunately no recollection of the names of the Vietnamese I met and only a general recollection of our conversations, which were conducted in French. I know that they were leaders in the independence movement and wanted us to let Washington know that the people of Vietnam were determined to gain their independence from France. During the war they had listened to Voice of America broadcasts which spoke of democracy and liberty, and they regarded the United States not only as a model but as the champion of self-government that would support their cause.

Three months later I learned that the French had put a price on my head, though in reality they had attached my name to Dewey's head. The description was of a balding man with a mustache who was six inches shorter than me. Obviously this was Peter Dewey, and the only reason my name was involved was that someone must have learned of my meetings with members of the Vietnamese independence movement. I don't believe I was ever in any danger, but clearly Dewey was persona non grata on account of his sympathy with the Vietnamese cause. As a matter of fact, all members of our mission shared his views, and our messages to Washington

predicted accurately what would eventually happen if France tried to deny independence to Vietnam. This is only one of the many ironies of Saigon 1945.

Another was the death of Peter Dewey. On the morning of September 26 he went to the airport, where he was to be met by an American Transport Command plane from Bangkok and flown on his way home to be discharged from the army. But the pilot got drunk the night before and failed to appear on schedule. At midday Dewey decided to return to the villa by a cross-country route that he had taken before. There had been skirmishing in the countryside around Saigon, which was controlled by Vietnamese guerrillas, with roadblocks at strategic points. Such a roadblock was just down the road that passed in front of our villa, and as Dewey was going through that roadblock he shouted something in French at the Vietnamese who were posted there. Major Bluechel, who was with him, did not understand French but knew that Dewey was upset because one of our officers had been severely wounded in an ambush on his way back from Dalat the night before, and Bluechel supposed he shouted something about that. Dewey had wanted to fly the American flag on the jeep, but General Gracey had forbidden it, saying that only he as commanding officer had the right to fly his flag. Thus there was no way for the Vietnamese to know that this was an American jeep or that these were American officers. No doubt they took Dewey to be a Frenchman, and when he shouted at them, they opened fire with their machine gun, killing him instantly. The jeep overturned, but Bluechel was able to get away, running to our villa. The Vietnamese pursued him and attacked the villa, but though only three of us were able to shoot back, we succeeded in driving them away. At the same time Lieutenant Frost radioed an SOS, and the British sent a troop of Gurkhas to the rescue. They proceeded as far as the

roadblock, which had been abandoned by then, but did not find Colonel Dewey's body or the jeep. In fact, the body was never found, though it was my grisly task for some time afterward to peer into newly dug graves where it was alleged to be buried.

I will not claim that Colonel Dewey could have influenced American policy on Vietnam, though of all the Americans in Saigon in 1945, he was the one with the best political connections in Washington both through OSS and through his father, who was a member of Congress. But it was a tragic mistake that he should have been killed by people he was trying to help and a terrible irony that he should have died in what he called "a pop-gun war" on the day he he was supposed to go home after surviving all sorts of dangers during World War II.

So we moved back to the Continental Hotel, which was to remain our headquarters for the duration of our stay in Saigon. In fact, we now owned the hotel and paid no bills. The real owner, M. Franchini, loved Americans because they were good for business. He sold the hotel to Major Frank White for $2, thus placing it under American protection, and was then able to demand exorbitant prices of the many terrified French residents who wanted to sleep under the same roof.

For a time Saigon was a city under siege. Frost and I, located with our radio in the annex of the Continental Hotel, had a good view from our balcony over the roofs of the city. Mostly we heard rather than saw the action. Things were generally calm during the day, but after nightfall we began to hear the sound of gunfire, beginning with the occasional stray shot by a jittery French

soldier. The French Foreign Legion, which had been interned by the Japanese the previous March, had now been released, with the result that its troops were trigger-happy and spoiling for a fight. With their release the shooting started in earnest. They defended the city, together with their new allies, the 6,000 Japanese troops stationed in Saigon. Every night we could hear Vietnamese drums signalling across the river, and almost on the stroke of 12, there would be an outburst of gunfire and new fires breaking out among the stocks of tea, rubber, and tobacco in the dockyards. One night the sound of machine gun fire and mortars and grenades went on for three hours. The following morning we were told that the Japanese had repulsed a Vietnamese attack across one of the bridges into the city.

Though all this shooting made us somewhat nervous, we all grew daily more sympathetic with the Vietnamese. We no longer had any contact with representatives of the independence movement, but the French colonials we met made us increasingly pro-Vietnamese with their constant talk of how they had done so much for this country and how ungrateful the people were and how they would treat them once they regained control. They never made the slightest suggestion that there was any self-interest in "la mission civilisatrice de la France." We knew a few French people we could respect but had no use for most of them, and our feelings were shared by Colonel Cédile, the new governor of Cochinchina who had been sent out from France by General de Gaulle; he would have liked to ship every colonial back to France and bring in an entirely new set of officials. Our views were also shared by the Free French soldiers who now began to arrive. Ironically, some of them thought they had come to liberate Vietnam. Also ironically, the Foreign Legion brought some new recruits who spoke only German: seasoned

veterans who had fought the war in Hitler's army. Of course the Legion has always accepted volunteers with no questions asked.

At the beginning of October General Gracey finally agreed to meet with the leaders of the Viet Minh who had been asking to see him ever since his arrival. Thereupon an armistice was declared, and things quieted down for a while, but only long enough for the British and French to bring in reinforcements: more Indian troops and French troops from France. Then the armistice was unofficially suspended, units of the British Indian Division went on the attack, cannon fire could be heard throughout the day, and the sky became dirty with smoke from fires set by British troops.

French warships appeared in the river and on the coast, and on October 6 General Leclerc, the so-called liberator of Paris, arrived to take command. Suddenly there were French flags flying everywhere and portraits of de Gaulle in every shop window. (A month earlier, when we arrived, the Vietnamese flag was flown alongside those of the Allied nations, and the portrait on display was that of Marshal Pétain, the leader of the Vichy government.) But the greatest event for the French of Saigon was the reopening of their country club, le Cercle Sportif. Wars and regimes and occupations could come and go, but life was not worth living without le Cercle Sportif. We went to the grand opening at the suggestion of Major Frank White, who with his journalist's sense of irony noted that British officers were now being feted by the same French residents who had collaborated and fraternized with the Japanese during the occupation. At his suggestion we went again a few days later and observed the social life of Saigon while the sound of cannon fire

boomed regularly in the background and ashes from burning Vietnamese villages drifted down on the tennis courts.

Ever since our arrival in Saigon former prisoners of war had been part of the street life--British, Australian, and Dutch, waiting to be repatriated. Just as the last Dutch P.O.W.s were leaving to go off and fight for a lost cause in Indonesia, a new kind of P.O.W. began appearing: hundreds of manacled Vietnamese being led through the streets in small groups by the French police. At the same time Vietnamese guerrillas launched their biggest midnight attack on the city, as if to serve notice that they had no intention of giving up the struggle. But by the end of October the fighting had quieted down around Saigon, with only occasional skirmishing and sniping. Instead of doing battle with regular troops, guerrillas cut roads and bridges, burned buildings and stockpiles. Already it was becoming apparent that thousands of soldiers might have a hard time overcoming the resistance of a population of millions.

In the middle of November I made a trip into the country north of Saigon to investigate the latest report that Dewey's grave was to be found in the cemetery of Thu Dau Mot. The effort was futile, as I knew it would be, and it seemed pointless to go to such lengths to recover a body, but the trip gave me the opportunity to learn how the British conducted their campaigns when I stayed with a regiment of Gurkhas. I liked the Gurkha soldiers and their British officers, and I like to think that they were going through the motions without taking things too seriously. After all, it was not their war, and firing cannonades into the peaceful countryside seemed about as futile and pointless as searching for Dewey's body. It was on this occasion that I learned that

some of the officers had led companies and battalions of Japanese soldiers in their "sweeps" of the country much as they led their Gurkhas now.

In a letter I wrote to my parents a few days later I gave my opinion of the political and military outlook:

> I do have some very reassuring information from Hanoi (Viet Minh Headquarters). It seems they are well-organized and realistic with a cosmic view of things. But France is determined to keep Indochina, determined enough to send out 120,000 troops. My visit to Thu Dau Mot also provided some information: that the Annamites have some military organization and that without the Japanese the task of clearing areas would be well-nigh impossible without large numbers. Also that the British have no great opinion of the French as soldiers.
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> A small percentage of Annamites are determined to sacrifice all and have a specific plan of action, but most of them, passively at least, want independence. The French are not quite so confident as they were at the start that this would be cleared up in a few weeks. And I believe that, unless they always keep large garrisons and patrols everywhere, they will not be able to keep the country submissive as it was before. The Annamite's great advantage lies in the fact that he is everywhere, that he does not need to fight pitched battles or organize troops to be a threat and that no amount of reprisal can completely defeat him. I cannot say how it will end, but at least it will be a long time before Frenchmen can roam

about the country with peace of mind.

I do not recall how I acquired that "very reassuring information" from Viet Minh headquarters in Hanoi. I do not believe I could have been in touch with the Viet Minh in late November, but I could have heard from one of my friends in OSS who had been a fellow student in the Vietnamese language program. Four of them were in Hanoi, and another had just arrived in Saigon. Or I could have heard from someone like my friend Captain Bannerjee, a very political and very well-informed Communist in the British Army, or Roger Pinto, a French professor who had made a study of Vietnamese politics during the war when he was interned for being a Jew.

My departure from Saigon on or about December 6 was as sudden as my arrival. Without any warning I was told to leave on twenty-four hours' notice. It seems that U.S. Army Headquarters in India had just discovered that I was impersonating an officer and had ordered OSS to have me cashiered. To save its own face, OSS simply transferred me to our headquarters in Singapore. There I was allowed to choose my next assignment and asked to be sent to Bangkok. OSS sent me by sea as an escort for an American car that was being shipped to the U.S. Legation in Bangkok, giving me a pleasant leave in the form of a cruise on the South China Sea. What OSS did not plan is that the freighter would first stop off in Saigon to deliver cargo, arriving there on December 25. Thus I was able to spend a four-day Christmas vacation with my former colleagues in Saigon before the ship sailed again.

Three of the original officers who had arrived in early September were still there. One of

them, Major White, had been our chief liaison with the British all along and had maintained good relations with British intelligence as well as other sources. He had been a journalist before the war and was to be a very successful journalist again after the war; meanwhile he was the most knowledgeable and enterprising officer on the mission. He had always been quite friendly with me, and now he made a proposal that appealed to me at once: that we try to obtain authorization to go to Hanoi to interview Ho Chi Minh.