

GREEN KNIGHT PRESS



How a real estate salesman, former CIA official G. B. Harnage proudly displays the souvenirs of war in the den of his Tucson home.

passengers, but Harnage packed in 15 or more on each trip. Despite attempts at keeping evacuation plans secret, thousands of Vietnamese were mobbing every point of exit.

Harnage made life or death decisions all day. He used a Swedish K submachine gun and his fist to keep order among the mobs desperate to board his ships. People even thrust babies into his arms, hoping their children, at least, would escape. He refused to let anyone bring more than one small bag with him, forcing people to discard most of their belongings; he later realized that some of the bags probably contained hoarded gold bars. "I probably threw millions of dollars in gold off those roofs," he says. "It didn't register at the time."

At about 11 a.m., Harnage was asked by CIA station chief Thomas Polgar to fly to the Lee Hotel to pick up 30 Vietnamese employees of the agency. He arrived at the hotel only to find a mob out of control. "I could not open the gates around the building," Harnage remembers. "I would have accomplished nothing except to have a mass of people rushing the helicopter."

When Harnage went through adjacent gates to look for his intended passengers, a South Vietnamese soldier pulled the pin from a grenade and said he would let it explode if he wasn't let in. Harnage responded by pointing his submachine gun at the man's face,

saying, "If you do, you'll never hear it go off." The soldier put the pin back into the grenade. Harnage eventually had to be pulled back through the gates by two policemen, returning to the Lee Hotel with nothing to show for his efforts but a badly ripped shirt.

After picking up a number of people, including his Vietnamese maid, who now lives in suburban Chicago, Harnage flew back to the embassy, where he made plans with Polgar to have the 30 CIA employees picked up at another location—the Pittman building. There Harnage's pilot landed on the top of an elevator shaft. Only a precarious ladder led to the chopper. "Those pilots were fantastic," Harnage says. "They flew those choppers until they had damn near dry tanks, never complaining, never asking anything. And they were all volunteers for this operation."

The first person Harnage encountered at the Pittman was a large Korean man, who tried to push his way onto the helicopter. "I had to hit him to stop him, knocking him back down and mangling my hand," Harnage recalls.

He quieted the mob, speaking in English and broken Vietnamese. "I kept telling them, 'We're going to try and make as many runs as we possibly can.' They seemed to accept the fact that we weren't going to leave them." Although Harnage recognized a few of the 30 CIA employees in the crowd, he does not know how many escaped.

On one of his return trips to the Pittman, the Korean man Harnage had hit, his face still bloody from the punch, came back up to the ladder and politely asked if he could board. Harnage let him on. The trips from Saigon to Tan Son Nhut, where larger helicopters shuttled refugees to ships 30 miles or so offshore, took about 15 minutes. Harnage usually rode the chopper's skids, with a passenger holding him to prevent him from plummeting to the ground if he were wounded by sniper fire. By the end of the day the sole of one shoe had ripped off.

At the embassy Harnage helped employees smash typewriters and radio transmitters with hammers. Outside, crowds of Vietnamese were drinking out of the embassy swimming pool. (Most of the embassy's water supply had been cut off.) On one trip Harnage got a glimpse of the massive gathering of North Vietnamese Army troops outside the city. His Air America chopper was about 500 feet up, within easy range of North Vietnamese weapons, but the NVA troops never fired.

Harnage's tour in Vietnam ended at 8:50 that evening. Polgar had asked him to direct another flight. But the Air America fleet was nearly out of fuel, and landing on rooftops in the dark was risky even for Harnage's expert pilots. At the same time, he felt the evacuation had to end. "We could have done this for days, and they'd still be

coming up the ladder," he says. "Every time I left the top of the Pittman, there were more people there than when I got there." He finally boarded a military chopper, which flew to the landing ship *USS Denver*.

The son of a cigarmaker, Harnage, an inveterate cigar smoker, was born in Tampa, Fla., where early on he acquired the nickname O.B. ("If you call me Oren, nobody will know who you're talking about.") His father had abandoned the family when O.B. was very young, and his mother died when he was 5. He was raised by his grandmother and five uncles in Georgia. He joined the Navy in 1943, when he was 17. Landing on Okinawa, Harnage was wounded by shrapnel in his leg and eye. As a re-

sult, he still limps slightly, and he became nearly blind in his left eye until surgery was performed in 1975. He finished World War II as a boatswain's mate in the Navy. But when the Navy said he was unfit for sea duty, he joined the Army Air Corps in 1947 and later served in Korea. In 1960 he was assigned by the Air Force to a secret CIA project—he still won't say what it was—and joined the Agency in 1965. He went to Vietnam two years later.

Harnage will not say exactly what he did for the CIA in Vietnam either, except that "we were gathering intelligence. We were not fighting a war." Whatever he did, it wasn't dull. When he got back to Tucson, he realized, "After having been involved in an op-

eration of that type for so many years, I felt very lost. I felt like I left a very important part of my life in Vietnam. I didn't know what I wanted to do."

He tried selling insurance. He worked as a private investigator, then as a uniformed security agent. Finally he settled in as a real estate salesman. Harnage lives in an adobe-style house with his wife of 36 years, Letty, who is a part-time executive secretary. Their three children are all grown. The home is decorated with Cambodian and Vietnamese art and Harnage's war souvenirs, which include a blood-stained North Vietnamese flag. In the living room is a painting of a scene in North Vietnam given to him by the artist, a North Vietnamese POW for whom he had arranged medical care.

Harnage has never talked publicly about the evacuation, but his reticence has not been from lack of pride in America's involvement in Vietnam. "I just feel that nobody in the world has the right to oppress another person's freedom," he says. "And for everybody to have this freedom, somebody's got to sacrifice for it. If you've never been there—if you've never seen it—you don't understand it." Written by FRED BERNSTEIN, reported by RON LABRECQUE

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O.B. and Letty play peek-a-boo with grandson Justin, 4. The North Vietnamese flag over the door is a memento whose origin Harnage won't discuss.



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Tracking down a spook

Habit of secrecy disclosed. Shortly after PEOPLE published the photograph on page 25 in our March 11 issue as part of our Vietnam series, readers began calling the magazine to say that the man on the building's roof was a CIA employee. Many of those callers would not give their names; none would name the CIA office.

Finally John Brown, a real estate agent in Tucson, called to identify the man as his friend and co-worker O.B. Harnage. When contacted in Tucson, Harnage hesitated—12 years in the CIA don't exactly lead to a chatty phone manner, especially when someone is calling—but then he acknowledged that he was in fact the man in the photograph. "For years I had seen that photograph on TV and in the papers and nobody had ever contacted me about it," Harnage said.

"Frankly, I don't think they ever