



Although the United States had pulled-out its fighting troops from Vietnam, in accordance with the 1973 cease-fire, some Americans had remained behind.

By the end of April, in 1975, it was becoming increasingly clear that North Vietnamese troops would capture Saigon, capital of South Vietnam. Afraid of what could happen, if they did not immediately evacuate, many people - including Vietnamese who had worked for the Americans - tried to leave by the best-possible means.

One of the best-possible means was via helicopters which were able to land on building roofs. Hubert van Es, a Dutch-national photojournalist working in Saigon for UPI (United Press International) took a picture of people trying to leave the city—via helicopter—on April 29, 1975.

Staying in Saigon as long as possible, before it was captured by North Vietnamese troops, van Es later told the story behind his iconic photo:

Around 2:30 in the afternoon, while I was working in the darkroom, I suddenly heard Bert Okuley shout, "Van Es, get out here, there's a chopper on that roof!"

I grabbed my camera and the longest lens left in the office - it was only 300 millimeters, but it would have to do - and dashed to the balcony.

Looking at the Pittman Apartments, I could see 20 or 30 people on the roof, climbing the ladder to an Air America Huey helicopter. At the top of the ladder stood an American in civilian clothes, pulling people up and shoving them inside.

Of course, there was no possibility that all the people on the roof could get into the helicopter, and it took off with 12 or 14 on board. (The recommended maximum for that model was eight.)

Those left on the roof waited for hours, hoping for more helicopters to arrive. To no avail. The enemy was closing in. I remember looking up to the sky and giving a short prayer.

After shooting about 10 frames, I went back to the darkroom to process the film and get a print ready for the regular 5 p.m. transmission to Tokyo from Saigon's telegraph office.

And this is where the confusion began.

For the caption, I wrote very clearly that the helicopter was taking evacuees off the roof of a downtown Saigon building. Apparently, editors didn't read captions carefully in those days, and they just took it for granted that it was the embassy roof, since that was the main evacuation site.

This mistake has been carried on in the form of incorrect captions for decades. My efforts to correct the misunderstanding were futile, and eventually I gave up. Thus one of the best-known images of the Vietnam War shows something other than what almost everyone thinks it does.

LATER that afternoon, five Vietnamese civilians came into my office looking distraught and afraid. They had been on the Pittman roof when the chopper had landed, but were unable to get a seat. They asked for our help in getting out; they had worked in the offices of the United States Agency for International Development, and were afraid that this connection might harm them when the city fell to the Communists.

One of them had a two-way radio that could connect to the embassy, and Chad Huntley managed to reach somebody there. He asked for a helicopter to land on the roof of our hotel to pick them up, but was told it was impossible.

Al Dawson put them up for the night, because by then a curfew was in place; we heard sporadic shooting in the streets, as looters ransacked buildings evacuated by the Americans. All through the night the big Chinooks landed and took off from the embassy, each accompanied by two Cobra gunships in case they took ground fire.

After a restless night, our photo stringers started coming back with film they had shot during the late afternoon of the 29th and that morning - the 30th. Nguyen Van Tam, our radio-photo operator, went back and forth between our bureau and the telegraph office to send the pictures out to the world.

I printed the last batch around 11 a.m. and put them in order of importance for him to transmit. The last was a shot of the six-story chancery, next to the embassy, burning after being looted during the night.

About 12:15 Mr. Tam called me and with a trembling voice told me that that North Vietnamese troops were downstairs at the radio office. I told him to keep transmitting until they pulled the plug, which they did some five minutes later. The last photo sent from Saigon showed the burning chancery at the top half of the picture; the lower half were lines of static.

The war was over. (See [van Es' article](#), initially published in the New York Times on April 29, 2005.)

Van Es left Saigon on June 1, 1975. His initial stop was in Laos.

He never received royalties for the picture, other than a small one-time bonus, according to his wife, Annie van Es:

According to his widow, Annie Van Es, Mr. Van Es earned no royalties from the helicopter evacuation photo apart from a one-time bonus of \$150 from UPI.

"Even after seeing his picture used tens of thousands of times, year after year, the lack of any reward NEVER bothered him," she wrote in an e-mail to friends. "He only felt lucky that he was there, in the right place at the right time. . . . He was proud of the picture and the importance it had [attained] in history but . . . he was never one to sing his own praise." (See [Washington Post article](#), by William Branigin, dated May 16, 2009.)

After his time in Vietnam, van Es—who was born in [Hilversum](#) on July 6, 1941—returned to Hong Kong (which had been his home-base for decades).

He continued to take amazing pictures until he died in Hong Kong during 2009.

Credits:

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as an iconic image for which no other media exists.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/People-Fleeing-Saigon-on-April-29-1975>

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