

A Badly Kept Secret

Two days of fruitless trips to Tan Son Nhut ensued. Clicker became discouraged again. The emotional rollercoaster wore on the ex-Marine. If he hadn't sent most of his money out of the country, it might have covered the needed bribe. But his US bank had closed its Saigon branch the day he had wired the money home. Only one US bank remained open. It would close any day. He didn't want to drive around with all his money around his waist. Desperate, armed South Vietnamese troops with little prospect of escaping roamed the streets. South Vietnamese Army guards eyed any American approaching Tan Son Nhut jealously. An ARVN corporal would see a wealthy American with a wad of dollars as his escape ticket.

Clicker remembered Da Nang. An hour after their two F-5s had returned, the airliner had limped into Tan Son Nhut. The airline owner had organized the flight to rescue women and children. The crew reported a harrowing tale. People in the wheel wells had jammed the landing gear in the down position. More people had jammed the rear stair door open, so the plane could not pressurize. Armed ARVN troops had ripped women and children off the stairways to the plane and trampled them to get on board.

Little wonder, then, that the American Embassy steadfastly maintained no evacuation was happening. But the clandestine one was a badly kept secret. Vietnamese with exit visas were streaming through Tan Son Nhut's main gate.

Another fruitless day passed for Clicker. But he noticed one important change at the base. He heard several C-130s land. They seemed to land more often than the jet transports had. If they had joined the evacuation in force, the opportunities for the Ngos would increase. Clicker checked with the reception desk of his hotel repeatedly. Whenever a clerk did anything for him, Clicker tipped him in dollars. Their value had now increased to 3,300 piastres.

That night, the Herks kept coming. Twice he counted two landing within an hour of each other.

During his Sunday morning breakfast, he heard two more planes land. As Clicker sipped his third cup of coffee, a reception clerk arrived with a note. Clicker tipped him a couple of dollars. He tore open the envelope. It simply listed an address, a time, and a curt instruction: "Go inside." The note bore the scrawled initials JN at the bottom. It was a pickup place and time from Jeff Nickerson! It looked hand-delivered. Someone must have knocked on his room door after he left for breakfast, then left the note at the reception desk.

The meeting time was at five o'clock that afternoon. Clicker left money for his breakfast and went to the reception desk. He brought his hotel bill up to date, a process he had thought to do every morning. Hopefully, the clerk had not opened the note and then resealed it. If the clerk had opened it, more people would likely be at the rendezvous.

Clicker grabbed his "go bag" and headed to the Ngo's temporary housing. He walked into the shop. An elderly gentleman greeted him.

"I'm looking for Colonel Tinh," Clicker stated slowly.

The gentleman bowed and went through the beaded doorway. A minute later, the gentleman emerged. The prettiest Vietnamese woman Clicker had ever seen followed him. She bowed slightly. Clicker returned the courtesy.

"I am Ngo Anh, Colonel Tinh's wife. You must be Clicker."

Her English was excellent with a French accent. Her beauty stunned Clicker.

Tinh, you devil, no wonder you've never introduced me, was Clicker's first thought. While she wore a loose-fitting top and slacks, he could imagine her in a traditional, form-fitting Ao Dai dress.

He detected a whiff of Chanel No. 19. Clicker recognized it because he had bought a bottle for Huyền at the Tan Son Nhut Base Exchange. He wondered if buying his wife a bottle had strained Tinh's budget.

"I have important information for him for you," Clicker uttered.

"I don't know when he will return."

"Is he at his office or his planes?" Clicker quickly asked.

"No." Clicker noticed Anh offered no elaboration.

"Can I write a note for him?"

Anh turned and addressed the older gentleman. He retrieved a quill pen and paper. Clicker copied Jeff's instructions exactly, then signed the note. He handed it to Anh. She read it.

"Do you understand its importance?" Clicker asked.

"Yes," she replied. "We cannot thank you enough for your help."