

Midnight on the Roof of the American Embassy: April 30, 1975

By Ambassador Kenneth Moorefield

April 30th marked fifty years since the end of the Vietnam War, and fifty years since I was evacuated by helicopter off the roof of our Saigon Embassy.

Ten years before, I graduated from West Point in the Class of 1965. Our class knew that Vietnam would be “our war”; and classmates ended up dying there.

However, my first assignment was in the Dominican Republic where I served as a platoon leader with the 82nd airborne division, part of the US intervention to prevent a communist takeover. On my birthday, the 10th of July, I was wounded in a riot and had to be evacuated to the US.

After recovering, in 1967 I went to South Vietnam for the first time as an infantry battalion advisor in the 21st Division of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) based in Ca Mau, capital of An Xuyen, the southern-most province in the Mekong Delta.

The province was flanked in the west by the notorious U Minh Forest, a long-held VC base from which they could attack at night and return before daylight.

In February 1968, Viet Cong (VC) forces launched the first Tet offensive. My Battalion, the 3/32nd, fought back against a large, well-planned and fiercely-executed Viet Cong (VC) assault.

We defeated this attack with the help of US tactical air support and the defiant defense of our South Vietnamese fighters, soldiers who were protecting their headquarters and their families.

When they retreated, the VC left many dead behind on the battlefield. But the enemy had demonstrated it could nearly surpass our firepower. I sent a team sergeant to Saigon with captured enemy AK-47 rifles to trade for M-60 machine guns, which we had not received that far down the supply chain.

Only a few months later, in April 1968, the VC attacked with another multi-battalion force in the so-called Mini Tet offensive. Again, they were repelled; and one of our new M-60s held off a direct assault on our battalion headquarters.

My confidence in the capability of our ARVN battalion is inscribed on a wall of the Infantry Museum in Ft. Benning, GA, in which I say that “It was the equal of any enemy force.”

But I was wounded in this operation, discovered the harsh reality of the impact of a high velocity bullet, and had to be medically evacuated to Walter Reed Hospital in Washington, DC.

When I arrived, the city was inflamed by the death of Dr. Martin Luther King and the area around the hospital was protected by federal troops. It seemed that I had just left one battlefield only to return to another.



Captain Moorefield and Captain Nhan

A month after I left, my courageous battalion counterpart and friend, Captain Nhan, was killed in battle leaving behind his wife and two young boys.

I volunteered to return, once sufficiently recovered, and returned to Vietnam as A Company Commander of the 2/47 Mechanized Infantry Battalion, US 9th Division. Our area of operations was the hotly-contested Long An province, just south of Saigon.

My company's previous commander had been killed when his command track ran over a powerful mine placed just outside our base camp.

We fought against a determined VC enemy contesting the government for provincial control.

One night we encountered a regimental-size VC force moving towards our position.

We neutralized a unit it sent to surprise us behind our position. And then brought the main VC force to intense overhead fire from an AC-47 "Spooky" gunship that arrived to support us. This action eliminated the immediate threat, but there were others still waiting in Long An.

I visited my soldiers in the hospital and wrote letters to the parents of those killed, telling them the truth--that their sons died courageously in battle.

I was selected to be his aide on the staff of the Commanding General, 25th Infantry Division, based in Cu Chi District. Its commander, Major General Edward Bautz, was a fearless WWII veteran who had distinguished himself in the famous Battle of the Bulge.



General Westmoreland with MG Bautz, accompanied by Captain Moorefield, at an inspection of a field base camp

We experienced several perilous adventures together, including when he surveilled the battlefield in Cambodia near the South Vietnamese border after the ARVN intervention, and then his command helicopter barely managed to take off after inspecting a deep-in-the-jungle enemy weapons cache.

We once flew to an infantry company from our division, pinned down in a rice paddy, under intense fire from the tree line. Overhead flew the Commander of all US Forces in Vietnam, along with MG Bautz, the division commander, and the brigade and battalion commanders of this beleaguered company, all flying at different altitudes five hundred feet apart.

I felt for the US soldiers below us, having been there, and even for their leaders above them: too much micro-supervision and not enough real support.

It was also an example of the extent to which our Army was hostage to the extensive use of helicopters in the war, at times, when it made no operational sense. It distanced commanders from the reality of what was happening on the ground below and did not inspire our men.

After my tour, I returned home, left the Army, and attended graduate school at Georgetown University.

While there, I was asked to join a radio panel discussion organized by the State Department to react to the recently concluded “Peace Agreement” with Hanoi.

I questioned whether the ARVN could long survive being perennially on the defensive against the ten NVA infantry divisions the agreement had authorized Hanoi to maintain in South Vietnam.

I returned to Vietnam in July 1973, this time as a diplomat and Special Assistant to Ambassador Graham Martin. The Ambassador was also a World War II veteran and a quintessential Cold Warrior. On the flight over, he confided that he hoped we could enable South Vietnam to become another South Korea.



Ambassador Martin with President Ford, Secretary of State Kissinger and General Wyand, Chief of Staff of the Army.

Our days in the Ambassador’s front office were long and eventful. After a year, however, I realized that I needed additional field experience and asked the Ambassador to send me closer to the front lines.

In August 1974, I flew to our Nha Trang Consulate General in Military Region II (MR II) and assumed the position of Political-Military Reports Officer.

On visits to the provinces, I met with our remaining US officer representatives and learned that the security situation was worsening—mainly because of increasingly

limited Army Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) military supplies and rising North Vietnamese Army (NVA) aggression.

After an ARVN defensive base was overrun on the outskirts of Pleiku, the regional military headquarters, I visited a military hospital to interview one of the survivors, a wounded ARVN Captain.

He explained that it had been a surprise attack by a much larger NVA force which had obtained access to their camp via an underground tunnel, perhaps aided and abetted by members of his battalion.

This aggressive NVA operation was among several indications that Hanoi could be planning a major offensive, conceivably starting in MR-II.

And, unfortunately, B-52 air strikes which we had effectively used against NVA forces and that had disrupted previous invasions--had been virtually eliminated as a deterrent when President Nixon resigned in September of 1974. This sent a message to Hanoi that we probably would not use that capability again.

When I returned to the Embassy, I was sent as a liaison officer in Saigon to the International Commission of Control and Supervision (ICCS), then comprised of Poland, Hungary, Iran and Indonesia.

Hanoi's forces, supported on the Commission by Hungary and Poland, frequently committed battlefield violations of the terms of the Peace Agreement, which did not include serious sanctions. The ICCS was effectively paralyzed in its mission to keep peace between the warring parties.

On January 31, during the traditional Tet holiday as Vietnamese families gathered across the country to celebrate--and during a declared truce--the NVA launched a surprise attack, initially directed against MR-II.

On March 27, President Ford sent a military team to South Vietnam, led by General Weyand, Army Chief of Staff, and former Commander of US Forces Vietnam, to review political and military conditions.

In his April 4 report, he described the situation as "dire" and "irretrievable", indicating a "chaotic collapse" was imminent and that the fall of Saigon could occur in only a "matter of weeks".

After the NVA offensive began, our Saigon Embassy was increasingly under siege as hundreds of Vietnamese sought evacuation; some, in desperation, climbed over the back wall.



Front of US Embassy Saigon



Rear of Embassy

At the end of the third week of April, I was sent to MACV at Ton Son Nhut Airport with instructions to establish an evacuation processing center for Americans and Vietnamese, which we did in a gymnasium. I was accompanied by a small support team of foreign service officers, supported by DoD personnel.

I carried instructions the Ambassador, received from the Secretary of State, authorizing the issuance of travel documents to Americans and eligible Vietnamese family.

Unfortunately, this guidance was limited to immediate Vietnamese family members: parents, children and grandparents. Not covered were members of the “extended family,” the traditional norm in Vietnamese society.

Driven by fear of the advancing NVA forces, hundreds of Vietnamese families soon became thousands, attempting to gain entry onto the airport and into our evacuation site.

At first, they arrived from the north--fleeing the oncoming offensive--and then from the south. Hastily leaving their homes, with little time to escape, they often came without the necessary documents for us to issue travel papers.

I sent them to government offices downtown to obtain identity cards, marriage licenses and adoption papers.

That did not work. The difficulty of traveling back and forth to Saigon, and the rising financial burden necessary to pay government officials, soon became insurmountable.

Another challenge arose when we faced families of as many as sixty members, unwilling to leave behind any of their valued relatives with them. If all large families were approved, however, many smaller families might not be able to leave later.

We could not make the impossibly difficult decision regarding who should stay or leave but believed that this decision had to be made. So, we asked family leaders to decide and to leave behind income earners who could enable those staying to survive. And, very responsibly, they did.

We also faced another obstacle--Ministry of Interior security agents patrolled our evacuation center to prevent senior ARVN officers and Vietnamese American orphans from leaving. The agents slowed the interview process and raised additional anxiety among our potential refugees.



Orphans on Ill-fated” Operation Baby Lift C-5A Aircraft

The government was concerned about Asian American orphans because a US “Operation Baby Lift” aircraft had recently crashed trying to return to Ton Son Nhut when flight problems developed soon after taking off.

On board were almost 300 passengers--orphans, nurses, and supporting American personnel, including DAO and Embassy staff. Tragically, half on-board died, including our Embassy medical doctor and his daughter, and many of the survivors were injured.

There were other flights that successfully rescued orphans, but this loss was especially deeply felt. And after this horrific event, the government recoiled at the negative international publicity it received, which had hurt its credibility and its pride. It issued an order prohibiting further orphan flights.

Given the impediments to interviewing applicants and the rapid advance of the approaching enemy divisions, we soon realized that time was running out. We had to act, and to act fast.

So, we undertook several initiatives--a false waiting line of interview applicants which served as a diversion that confused the security agents about where was the “real” line of applicants.

We also created official language to address specific problems: marriages were arranged, and children were adopted, in consideration of their dire circumstances and the pressing need for the evacuation to move forward.

Then, a nun dressed in full habit arrived at my desk on a “divine” mission, quietly pleading passage for her Asian American orphans.

I had no instructions nor authority to help orphans or the nuns on her staff, who were not American citizens; and the government had prohibited evacuating orphans. At first, I turned her away, but believed we had to help.



Vietnamese refugee children boarding C-130 evacuation flight

We devised a plan presented to the nun, when she inevitably returned, asking her to form orphans into “families” headed by men and women posing as parents from orphanage staff.

It was a dangerous plan; if caught, the government could shut down our evacuation. But they and we were blessed--the plan worked--and they all safely left.

Meanwhile, the evacuation center hummed with the nervous energy of desperate families, fearful of the impending threat. Under pressure from the swiftly approaching NVA army, diminishing time became a relentless enemy,

Amid the turmoil, we saw striking glimpses of resilience and courage which further energized and inspired us: a young mother clutching her infant; an elderly couple supporting each other through the throng; children with wide eyes, filled with trepidation and hope.

Becoming emotionally drained, but moved by their need and their fear, we worked against the clock for nine days and late into the nights.

We strived to maintain a semblance of order and a sense of humanity, even though the emotional intensity of those days ultimately left indelible marks on each of us.

Then, on the 28th, NVA artillery and rocket fire struck Saigon including the evacuation airfield runway, reportedly leaving it unusable. The Ambassador personally visited the runway to assess its condition.

Nevertheless, the next morning, April 29, a C-130 aircraft attempted to land and was irreparably damaged by an NVA rocket. The fixed wing phase of the evacuation had to cease.

NVA surface-to-air missiles had already shot down several ARVN aircraft, including a helicopter. Uncertain about Hanoi’s intentions, our Washington leadership feared that it might target US aircraft.



Rocket attack on airport runway

That night was a blur of activity, punctuated by raw emotion and the heightened need to move forward with the planned helicopter lift operation, named "Frequent Wind".

In the evacuation center camp, we still had responsibility for several hundred refugees who had not been able to leave by plane.

Suddenly, I realized everyone needed to eat! With a few volunteers, we broke into the supply room, opened a cafeteria, and fed the many hungry their first "western" meal.

Before leaving for my apartment, I brought inside our camp Vietnamese families who had been caught outside--for their sake and ours--should we receive a ground attack.

The two Marines on our security perimeter who helped me, Corporals McMahon and Judge, were killed later that night by a rocket, the last Marines and US military personnel to die in the Vietnam War.

Soon after I reached home, a rocket crashed through the roof of the Majestic Hotel a few blocks away. Artillery and rocket explosions left the city visibly burning, and no place seemed safe.

At first light, I took a ride back to the air base and found that rockets were still landing, including at the front entrance. We found safety in a nearby ditch.

In the Defense Attache offices, I met with a Navy/Marine liaison team needing help locating the sites in Saigon where the Embassy had pre-positioned “high risk” Vietnamese, those deemed especially vulnerable for having worked closely with the U.S.

To assist, I organized a small convoy of buses; nearby the MACV entrance where we were gathering, another rocket landed.

We hurtled through madcap traffic--families in cars driving wildly, some brandishing weapons, frantically seeking a way out of the city and the country.

When we arrived downtown, it had become increasingly dangerous: armed soldiers--partially uniformed and unruly--chaotically drove around in commandeered military trucks, as anarchy approached the city.

We stopped in front of my apartment building. I ran to the Brinks Hotel, a US Army residential facility down the street, and called the Embassy to find somewhere to take my convoy. No place was left but the Embassy itself.

At the Brinks--a memory frozen in time--the hotel's courtyard filled with seated employees and their families: men, women, and children with dejected faces after waiting the whole day; no one had come to rescue them.

I walked through them, all eyes on me; ashamed, knowing that neither I nor anyone else could help.

I returned to the convoy. Soon we could no longer move together, so we separately made our way onto the Embassy grounds.



Helicopter landing in courtyard at US Embassy

For the first time, I had no assigned responsibility.

As hundreds of evacuees were flown away from the courtyard, I wandered through the silent Embassy hallways and offices, accepting the harsh reality that the war had come down to this.



Evacuation helicopter landing on 7th Fleet aircraft carrier and pushed overboard.



Just before midnight, Hanoi threatened to attack if we did not shut down the evacuation by sunrise.

In the early morning hours, the Marine assigned to the helipad on the Embassy roof was seriously injured when he fell on to the roof below.



Helipad on Embassy roof

Not long thereafter, I went up to the helipad to facilitate the landing of our rescue helicopters and assist our Embassy staff to board.

During a very long night, an angry crowd loudly protested in front of the Embassy, while others took over the back of the Embassy compound; our jet aircraft flew cover overhead, receiving sporadic ground fire; MACV burned in the distance; and our rescue helicopters landed continuously.

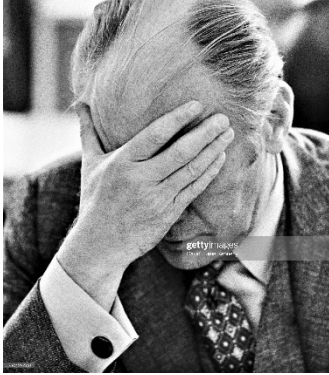
As the sun was rising, I helped the Ambassador onto his assigned helicopter and then departed on the next flight.

The remaining Marines protected us when Vietnamese broke through the front door and started climbing the stairs in hopes of gaining access to our evacuation site. The Marines defended and were then the last to leave.



NVA tank entering through front gate of Independence Palace

A few hours later, an NVA tank crashed through the front gate of Independence Palace; they controlled the capital, and the war was effectively over.



President Ford upon learning that Saigon has been lost.

It needs emphasizing that my colleagues and I at the evacuation center were only a few among the many who contributed to making such a large-scale evacuation successful, an operation which saved close to 130,000 Vietnamese lives.

There were many who deserve commendation: among them were our officers and staff at the Embassy and four Consulates and Embassy, and the Marines sent to guard the Embassy; the C-130 pilots from the 374th Tactical Air Wing in the Philippines who landed every thirty minutes for nine days; and the Navy and Marine helicopter pilots from the 7th Fleet who flew all that last day. (Regrettably, one of the fleet's helicopters crashed into the sea that night, killing both pilots.)

Vietnam war veterans also returned to help save Vietnamese; and two foreign service officers arrived from Secretary Kissinger's staff to fine their high-risk war counterparts and bring them and their families to our evacuation center.

For another three days, the ships offshore received Vietnamese who had commandeered small aircraft and helicopters and flown out to the 7th Fleet aircraft carriers, while others came by boat. The Fleet then sailed to the Philippines; and from there, I flew home.

The seriousness of the threat to many of the Vietnamese rescued cannot be overstated. The new SRV government reportedly sent as many as hundreds of thousands--to "reeducation" in prisoner of war camps--where they had little food and medical care, and from which not everyone returned.

Once back in Washington, the State Department sent me to the refugee resettlement center at Camp Indiantown Gap, Pennsylvania.



Refugees at Camp Indiantown Gap

Our mission was to find sponsors either in the US or in other countries for the thirty thousand refugees in the camp. It was rewarding for our staff and those at the other three refugee camps. And, somehow, it was all accomplished by the end of 1975.

When I returned to Washington, I realized that there was still a serious problem concerning Vietnam War veterans.

The country had not always welcomed them back with “open arms”. There were no “ticker tape parades”, especially not for the thousands of seriously wounded still in veterans’ hospitals.

I volunteered to assist the Vietnam Veterans Leadership Program (VVLP), part of the Action Agency, that had been funded by Congress to help veterans find shelter, jobs, and health care; and to gain the respect many of them had been denied for their war service.

VVLP was founded and led by ACTION Agency Director Tom Pauken, also a veteran. He provided the leadership and with his dedicated staff of Vietnam war veterans, along with the program’s highly motivated support personnel, VVLP established fifty non-profit foundations across the US that addressed those key issues.

VVLP was also supported by ten thousand Vietnam veteran volunteers--veterans helping veterans--all of whom together helped make a difference in countless veterans’ lives.



Signing of Agreement establishing
US-SRV Diplomatic Relations

In 1995, twenty years after leaving Saigon, by then renamed Ho Chi Minh City, I arrived with my wife and daughter to Hanoi, the capital of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV).

At first, it was strangely unsettling to encounter SRV Vietnamese wearing helmets with gold stars, the same as our former enemy. There was mistrust, but also a common purpose.

And I felt fortunate to be among our team of envoys, many of whom had also served in Vietnam and wanted to transform our war memories into something positive.

We were dedicated to making a reality out of our new diplomatic relationship with the SRV, to finding ways to convert our former war enemy into an economic partner, if not a political ally.

We were led by Ambassador Pete Peterson, a former Air Force fighter pilot who had spent years in the Hanoi Hilton as a prisoner.

I had the responsibility for developing trade and investment relations. There were many challenges dealing with the SRV government and its state-controlled socialist economy, which differed so significantly from our own.

But, they needed investment and trade; and with support from across the US government, and the determined effort of many US firms, the SRV moved gradually forward with market-oriented reforms and a more open economy.

Over the years since then, trade and investment relations between the US and Vietnam have achieved extraordinary progress. Today, the US is Vietnam's primary export market and US investors continue to play a key role in the development of Vietnam's economy.

And the Vietnamese refugees who resettled in the US, and their descendants, have contributed in many ways to the enrichment of the immigrant melting pot that is America.

Postscript: I am honored to have served my country in Vietnam as a soldier and diplomat, whose contributions were enabled by the support of so many; and I will never forget those who made the ultimate sacrifice, the more than 58,000 who died there.

Ambassador Kenneth P. Moorefield - Career Overview

Born: July 1943 in Temple, Texas [Kenneth P. Moorefield \(born July, 1943\), American ambassador | World Biographical Encyclopedia](#)

Education

- Bachelor of Science, United States Military Academy (West Point), Class of 1965 [PrabookFlickr](#)
- Graduate Studies in International Affairs, Georgetown University, 1972 [AdvocacyfoundationforhumanrightsFlickr](#)
- Senior Seminar, 1995 [The Honorable Kenneth P. Moorefield - Deputy Inspector General for Special Plans and Operations, U.S. Department of Defense](#)

Military Career (U.S. Army)

Ambassador Moorefield began his distinguished career as a U.S. Army officer after graduating from West Point in 1965. His military service included:

- **Combat Operations:** Served combat tours as a U.S. Army Airborne Infantry Platoon Leader in the Dominican Republic operation and in Vietnam as a Mechanized Infantry Company Commander and Vietnamese Infantry Battalion Adviser [Board of Directors | Advocacy Foundation for Human Rights](#)
- **Vietnam Service:** Was an adviser to the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) in 1967 and 1968 [Interview with Kenneth Moorefield, 1981 - Digital Commonwealth](#)
- **Military Decorations:** Silver Star, Purple Heart, Bronze Stars for Valor and Service, Army Commendation Medal (V Device) [Kenneth P. Moorefield \(born July, 1943\), American ambassador | World Biographical Encyclopedia +2](#)

Diplomatic Career (U.S. State Department)

Early Diplomatic Positions

- **Vietnam (1973-1975):** Returned to Vietnam as an assistant to the ambassador from 1973 until the end of the war [Interview with Kenneth Moorefield, 1981 - Digital](#)

[Commonwealth](#), serving as special assistant to Ambassador Graham Martin [A Piece of the 1968 Attack on U.S. Embassy, Saigon - The National Museum of American Diplomacy](#)

- **Saigon Evacuation:** Organized the evacuation for tens of thousands of "high-risk" Vietnamese citizens and received the Department of State Superior Honor Award for Heroism [Board of Directors | Advocacy Foundation for Human Rights](#)

Overseas Assignments

During his overseas career with the Departments of State and Commerce, he held political, economic, consular, and commercial officer positions at embassies in Vietnam, Peru, Venezuela, the United Kingdom, the U.S. Mission to the European Union, and France [The Honorable Kenneth P. Moorefield - Deputy Inspector General for Special Plans and Operations, U.S. Department of Defense](#)

Vietnam Return (Post-War)

- **Hanoi (1995-1998):** Was in Hanoi to open the US embassy and served there from 1995 to 1998 [Kenneth Moorefield | United States Embassy, Socialist Republic of Vietnam](#) as Director of the U.S. Foreign Commercial Service in Hanoi [A Piece of the 1968 Attack on U.S. Embassy, Saigon - The National Museum of American Diplomacy](#)

Ambassadorial Appointments

- **Ambassador to Gabon and São Tomé and Príncipe (2002-2004):** Sworn in as Ambassador to the Republic of Gabon and the Democratic Republic of Sao Tome and Principe on April 2, 2002 [StateFlickr](#), serving until September 18, 2004 [The Honorable Kenneth P. Moorefield - Deputy Inspector General for Special Plans and Operations, U.S. Department of Defense](#)
- **Environmental Leadership:** Led the U.S. Government's Central African environmental strategy to halt the degradation of the invaluable Congo Basin tropical rain forests and was recommended for the Department of State's highest Environmental Accomplishment Award [Board of Directors | Advocacy Foundation for Human Rights](#)

Department of Defense Service

Iraq/Afghanistan Transition

- **Transition Planning (2005-2007):** Served as senior State Department representative on the Iraq/Afghanistan Transition Planning Group, from December 2005 to June 2007 [United States Department of Defense Office of Inspector General](#)

Department of Defense Inspector General

- **Deputy Inspector General for Special Plans and Operations:** Kenneth P. Moorefield-- Deputy Inspector General for Special Plans and Operations at the Department of Defense Office of Inspector General
- **Recognition:** Awarded the IG Distinguished Service award for his innovative solutions to U.S. [Board of Directors | Advocacy Foundation for Human Rights](#) challenges

Additional Service and Recognition

- **Vietnam Veterans Leadership Program:** Served as National Director of the Vietnam Veterans Leadership Program, "ACTION Agency" [Board of Directors | Advocacy Foundation for Human Rights](#)
- **Awards:** Various military and Foreign Service decorations including the Silver Star, Purple Heart, State Department Superior Honor Award, and two Presidential Meritorious Honor Awards [The Honorable Kenneth P. Moorefield - Deputy Inspector General for Special Plans and Operations, U.S. Department of Defense](#)

Current Activities

- **Board Positions:** Chairman of the AFHR Advisory Board, Senior Advisor and Member of the Board of Directors at CogentInfor Technology, and active member on the Board of Directors for the Enough Is Enough Foundation [Board of Directors | Advocacy Foundation for Human Rights](#)

Ambassador Moorefield represents a distinguished career spanning over 30 years in military, diplomatic, and civil service, with particular expertise in Southeast Asia, Africa, and national security affairs. His unique combination of combat experience, diplomatic service, and inspector general work demonstrates exceptional versatility in public service.