

At Nha Trang

April 2, 1975

NHA TRANG, South Vietnam, April 1—Panic held this city, long an important coastal resort, in its grip today as terror-stricken people, fearing that they would be trapped, fled in scenes of confusion like those that accompanied the fall of Da Nang two days ago.

The following dispatch is by George Herbouze of Agence France-Presse, who was among the last group of foreigners to be evacuated by air from Nha Trang.

Soldiers who left the abandoned Central Highlands and others recently arrived from Da Nang, roamed the streets, plundering and looting.

Shops closed yesterday and no public buildings remained open, nor did the banks and the post office. The dial telephone was out of order.

Local officials and army officers had started the wave of panic by sending their families to Saigon, 275 miles to the south. Up to 24 hours ago Nha Trang was under the firm control of the province commander, a colonel. Now it is prey to armed hordes firing indiscriminately, victims of a general fear they are helping to fan.

This morning, as the panic intensified, the American Consul General, Moncrieff J. Spear, told the French Vice Consul, Henry Stralheim, "I can't answer for anything any more." He said later that the consulate general was closing. He apparently succeeded in evacuating his American and Vietnamese employees by helicopter and ship.

Riots broke out around the consulate, where hundreds of people tried to climb over or push past the fence in the hope of getting aboard one of the helicopters taking off from the courtyard.

Helicopters were the last means available of getting to the airport, from which the French departed on planes provided by their embassy. All other routes have been closed by the Vietnamese Army.

In the overcrowded courtyard of the American Consulate the last two Frenchmen waiting to be evacuated had abandoned everything; only a strict minimum was allowed by the authorities.

The helicopters had intended to ferry all evacuees to the airport during the afternoon, but they had to stop because the runway was no longer safe.

When the first of two Air America two-engine planes landed at the airport there was a mad rush to get aboard.

Soldiers standing on the plane's ramp fired unceasingly over the crowd in an attempt to control it. This correspondent, who was dragged aboard by a steward, found himself with a Vietnamese child in his lap; the child had lost his parents. Through the windows one could see the agonized faces of those left behind.

A young woman was weeping silently because she had left her five children and 10 other members of her family. The consulate promised to return for them with extra helicopters and ferry them to a landing ship offshore.

The only foreigners believed to be left in Nha Trang were three French priests and a nun. The nun, Sister Marguerite, refused to leave the 20 Vietnamese Carmelites in her care while the Rev. Marc Lefebvre and the Rev. Joseph Viot would not abandon the parishoners they had led to Nha Trang along the refugee road. The other priest was in a refugee camp.

Most of the refugees had no idea where they were going. Some sought haven on an uncultivated, unpopulated strip of land about two miles offshore. They cannot survive there, but at least, they said, they will be out of the way of the rockets. Others fled along the road to Cam Ranh, 40 miles south, which is also endangered if not fallen.

The wildest rumors spread quickly. The military base at Duc My, 30 miles away was said to have been attacked. Since the area was quiet, the rumor was almost certainly false, but it was readily believed.

The Communists are piercing the hands of all young girls another rumor said. Yet another said President Nguyen Van Thieu had promised the Communists that they could take Nha Trang.