

Special Edition



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Revetments

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**REQUIEM
FOR
TAN SON NHUT**

Requiem for Tan Son Nhut

By

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Requiem

The Tan Son Nhut Airbase that those of us who served there remember as a mainstay of South Vietnam's democratic government ceased to exist in 1975. The airbase succumbed thirty years ago to an agonizing "death" on Wednesday, April 30, 1975 when Saigon fell to North Vietnamese Communists and the fledgling Republic of South Vietnam ceased to exist after only twenty years. The end was best described by Tran Ngoc De, then thirty seven years old, who wrote: "Suddenly, a black curtain pulled down, covering my life and my country."

Recalling the fall of Saigon in a *New York Times* article ten years later on April 30, 1985, the late Graham Martin, Ambassador to South Vietnam at the time of the fall of Saigon said, "In the end, we simply cut and ran. The American national will had collapsed."

For this thirtieth anniversary, I offer a requiem—a moment of silence to remember the airbase, those who previously served there and especially those who died there. Sadly, this anniversary will pass without the knowledge or interest of many Americans; but, we remember.

In 1975, Americans were still recovering from Watergate and the resignation of President Richard Nixon. Discos dominated the dance scene, Elton John was a star, and "One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest" swept the academy awards. American combat forces had left Vietnam two years earlier in 1973, much to the relief of most Americans. Many believed it was time to put the Vietnam era behind them. Few in the United States gave any thought to events occurring in Vietnam on April 30, 1975.

Brief Historical Notes

In 1820, Captain John White of Salem, Massachusetts was the first American to visit Vietnam. He would not be the last. One hundred thirty-nine years later, the United States became directly involved in the civil strife between North and South Vietnam.

France controlled Vietnam from 1857 until the Japanese occupation during World War II and attempted to regain control of Vietnam at the end of the war in 1945. In September 1945, communist politburo rulers in Hanoi declared the independence of Vietnam and formed a provisional Communist government in Hanoi known as the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. History would show that the new nation was far from being democratic. Ho Chi Minh, venerable leader of the Communist in Vietnam, reportedly said in the 1940s to the French who occupied his homeland, "You can kill ten of my men for every one I kill of yours, but even at those odds, you will lose and I will win."

Following WW II, the French government established itself in Saigon. Ho Chi Minh's forces, known then as the Vietminh, enlightened Vietnamese, attacked the French with the intention of driving them out and unifying the nation under communist rule. French colonial rule ended when the Vietminh defeated French forces at Dien Bien Phu, on May 7, 1954. The United States had been assisting the French secretly with supplies and equipment. Following defeat of the French in 1954, participants in a conference in Geneva, Switzerland divided Vietnam at the seventeenth parallel into two areas known as North Vietnam and South Vietnam. Defeated, the French subsequently withdrew from Vietnam. In 1960, Minh's communist

government in North Vietnam formed a political wing known as the National Liberation Front for South Vietnam and established the People's Liberation Armed Forces. The North Vietnamese supplied and trained these forces and pursued war against South Vietnam. In 1969, Ho Chi Minh invited leaders of the National Liberation Front in South Vietnam to Hanoi and recognized them as the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam.

Direct involvement of the United States in the affairs of Vietnam increased in 1959, the year military advisors Major Dale R. Buis and Master Sergeant Chester M. Ovnand were killed in a communist attack on Bien Hoa, thus becoming the first American casualties. American involvement escalated further when Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution in 1964. Passed in reaction to an alleged attack by the North Vietnamese on the USS Maddox, the Tonkin resolution gave the President unusual powers to assist South Vietnam.

Beginning in 1965, a massive buildup of American forces occurred and the Vietnam War escalated quickly. American viewers watched grim events in Vietnam on the nightly news. Opposition to American involvement grew. Statements from officials claiming they could "see light at the end of the tunnel" proved overly optimistic as the number of American killed and wounded mounted. Many historians consider the "Tet Offensive" in January, 1968 as the turning point for the American people. During an agreed upon cease fire to celebrate one of Vietnam's most important holidays, the Communists took unfair advantage of the cease fire and launched widespread attacks against South Vietnam with Tan Son Nhut and Saigon as major targets. American and Vietnamese

forces delivered the North Vietnamese leaders a resounding defeat, but while the Communist lost heavily on the battlefield, they won their propaganda offensive in the news media. Leaders in the United States began to reduce aid to the South Vietnamese and to withdraw American troops. "Peace with honor" it was called. You be the judge.

Following the Paris Peace Accords signed in January, 1973 all American military combat forces withdrew from Vietnam by March 29, 1973. The United States and South Vietnam complied with the peace treaty. The Communist did not. The treaty permitted only fifty American troops, primarily to guard the embassy and defense attaché. In contrast, it authorized eighty thousand North Vietnamese troops to remain in South Vietnam. The North Vietnamese subsequently trained fifteen army divisions, built covert supply roads, and amassed a major stockpile of military equipment and ammunition in South Vietnam, all in violation of the peace treaty. North Vietnam then unleashed a major military offensive against South Vietnam on March 9, 1975. Their time-table for conquering South Vietnam was two years. They accomplished their goal in just fifty-fifty days. How could this rout have happened?

Countdown to Defeat

By early April, the effectiveness of the final offensive by the communist was evident as the Northern provinces and cities of South Vietnam fell one after the other. Many of South Vietnam's military personnel abandoned their positions and fled to escape harm and to provide personal protection for their families. An ill-fated attempt to get orphan children out of Vietnam ended in disaster when the C-5 aircraft carrying 314 passengers, lost a section of its tail, decompressed rapidly, and was forced to land in the silt of the Mekong River Delta. The press reported that 155 were killed, most of them children.

North Vietnam's final offensive

in 1975 was based upon a well-founded assumption that the American public and its elected leaders were no longer willing to provide funding to South Vietnam for continuation of the war. The communists knew that on April 17, 1975 the \$722 million appropriation requested for South Vietnam was not approved by congress. They also listened very carefully to a speech made in New Orleans by President Gerald Ford on April 23, 1975 in which used the word "finished" in referring to the American role in Vietnam. Although Washington had pledged to respond with force to assist South Vietnam if the communists breached the peace accords, there was no American response.

By April 20, 1975 North Vietnam and the Viet Cong controlled over sixty percent of South Vietnam. Three divisions of North Vietnam's army were only thirty-eight miles from Saigon. The following day, April 21st, South Vietnam's President, Nguyen Van Thieu resigned and was later whisked out of the country under cover of darkness by the CIA in the American ambassador's four-engine fixed-wing aircraft. The aging and ill vice president held office for a few days and then he too resigned. General Doung Van ("Big") Minh became the last President.

Saigon, Monday, April 28, 1975

As the offensive of North Vietnam advanced, it became obvious that South Vietnam was quickly running out of ammunition, fuel, and spare parts. At Tan Son Nhut, the Vietnamese Air Force was weakened severely by the loss of planes. Pilots stole aircraft to fly their family members and friends to safety. To compound matters, Washington ordered that a large number of the jet aircraft previously given to South Vietnam be flown to Thailand to save them.

On Monday, Tan Son Nhut Airbase was bombarded by 122mm rockets and powerful 130mm artillery. The attacks, designed to achieve psy-

chological objectives as well as physical damage, continued throughout Monday. Early in the day, the city's streets became jammed with traffic and people on foot. Panic driven and in fear for their lives, many military personnel discarded their uniforms to avoid being identified. Many Vietnamese took only what they could carry and sought to purchase escape from Saigon. Others sought evacuation at the embassy.

Monday afternoon at South Vietnam's Presidential Palace, Big Minh took office as President. His call for a cease fire and discussions with the communist Provisional Revolutionary Government was refused. Instead of talks, a approximately 6:00PM Tan Son Nhut was attacked by a flight of A-37 Dragonflies that could carry four 500 pound bombs, two rocket pods and the firepower of 7.62mm Gatling gun. The attack was led by a South Vietnamese defector who had trained at England Air Force Base in Louisiana, the same defector pilot who had bombed the presidential palace weeks earlier. Major damage was sustained at Tan Son Nhut.

Advisors urged Ambassador Graham Martin to approve stepped-up evacuation plans, including cutting down a large tamarind tree on the embassy grounds to create a landing area for helicopters. The plan called for smaller CH-46 Sea Knight choppers to land on the embassy's roof while the larger CH-53 Sea Stallions conducted evacuations from the grounds of the embassy. Major Jim Kean, USMC wrote that the ambassador ordered a "work-a-day" attitude. The ambassador was concerned about panic among the Vietnamese. To present the appearance of normal operations, Ambassador Martin and his wife Dottie, along with their poodle "Nit Noy", slept in their villa that night, despite the obvious dangers. They were guarded by Marine Security Guards of the Personal Protective Security Unit who lived at the villa.

At midnight on Monday the 28th while the ambassador spent his

last night in Vietnam, North Vietnamese General Dung assessed the communist gains for the day and made a decision to launch the final offensive into Saigon the following morning on Tuesday the 29th.

Washington, Monday, April 28, 1975

Meanwhile, as General Dung made his decision at midnight the 28th, it was just before noon in Washington due to the twelve hour time difference. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger had previously sought and received assurance from Secretary Leonid Brezhnev, Soviet party boss in Moscow, that the United States would have until May 3, 1975 to complete an orderly withdrawal. The North Vietnamese had other plans.

President Ford's daily schedule for April 28th showed that he had an active seventeen-hour day. Late in the afternoon the president was advised of the worsening situation in Saigon. He called a meeting of the National Security Council for 7:30PM, Monday evening. Meanwhile, Kissinger, working through the Soviet embassy in Washington, explored with the communists the prospects of keeping at least an embassy presence in Saigon. The essence of the reply was that if the United States would make certain admissions and bring cash to the table to pay for restoration of Vietnam, continuation of the embassy might be possible. Washington's leaders rejected the offer. Kissinger did receive assurances that the communists would not attack Americans during the evacuation, provided that Americans did not make a "show of force".

Kissinger then sent a "FLASH" message to ambassador Martin which said, in part, ". . . if the airport (TSN) is unusable for fixed-wing aircraft or becomes so during the day [of the 29th] . . . you are immediately to resort to helicopter evacuation of all repeat all Americans, both from the DAO (Defense Attaché Office) compound and from the embassy compound." Just before midnight on April 28th

President Ford ordered that fixed-wing evacuations cease. President Ford wrote of that event in his autobiography, "... Refugees were streaming out onto the airport's runways, and our (evacuation) planes couldn't land."

Saigon, Tuesday, April 29, 1975

Tuesday, April 29, 1975 in Saigon was a sweltering, rainy day. Heavy shelling of Tan Son Nhut beginning at 3:30AM did extensive damage. Lance Corporal Darwin Judge and Corporal Charles McMahon were killed while guarding the Defense Attaché's compound, the last two casualties in Vietnam. Also during the early morning attack on the 29th a USAF C-130 cargo aircraft was destroyed, the control tower and command center were hit and the CIAs Air America area sustained damage. More than 130 shells or rockets occurred that Tuesday.

The communists controlled the Newport Bridge, effectively cutting off a major road into and out of Saigon. North Vietnamese General Tran Van Tra, operations commander of the forces advancing on Tan Son Nhut and Saigon, had amassed more than 150,000 troops around Saigon as he approached the base and city from five different directions with twelve divisions. Only two South Vietnamese divisions remained to defend the capital and its airbase. North Vietnam had more than six hundred tanks in the South. South Vietnam had fewer than one hundred and was lacking critical supplies including fuel and ammunition. With Tan Son Nhut in communists' hands, the fate of South Vietnam was sealed.

An estimated two thousand Vietnamese crowded into the American Embassy and its combined recreation area on April 29th. Thousands of others who could not get into the compound swarmed the walls and gates. Many attempted to come over the wall. Marine Security Guards stood atop the wall to keep them out. Panic continued in the streets. It was reported by then Staff Sergeant Colin Broussard that

one woman tossed her young child over the wall apparently hoping someone would take it to America.

Inside, the ambassador in his third floor suite and the CIA station chief on the sixth floor still clung to their hope that a last minute deal could be made with the communists or that leaders in Washington would somehow save the impending disaster. Early that Tuesday morning, Ambassador Martin directed that he be taken to Tan Son Nhut. Members of his staff, Major Jim Kean, Commanding Officer of Company "C", Marine Security Guard Battalion, and Staff Sergeant Colin Broussard, the personal body guard of the ambassador for that day, advised the ambassador not to go. Broussard wrote, "I attempted to explain to him that it was too dangerous for him to go. He told me to get the team ready and I didn't question him again."

With two marine security guards in the lead vehicle seeking the safest route and two in his staff car plus two Vietnamese Special Police officers as his protection, Ambassador Martin toured Tan Son Nhut in his armor-plated 1972 Chevrolet to determine the condition of the airbase. He concluded that the damage could be repaired but that there were not enough forces to protect the safety of those involved. The many weeks of orderly evacuation by fixed-wing aircraft had come to an end. Fixed-wing aircraft en route to Tan Son Nhut were first put on hold and then cancelled.

At 11:00AM the ambassador indicated that he must go to his villa. According to Broussard, "All of his staff pleaded with him not to go because of sporadic firefights, artillery and rockets . . . I informed the ambassador of the current security situation at the embassy (and) of reports of snipers and sporadic rockets firing blindly into the city. He waved them off so I got things ready."

As Broussard attempted to drive the ambassador out through an embassy gate, the gate was nearly over-

run by the Vietnamese. He backed up the staff car and the gates were finally secured against the mob. The ambassador then decided that he would walk the two blocks to his villa. With Staff Sergeants Broussard and Daisey as his body guards, the ambassador walked through a secret door that connected to the French Embassy and then out to the street. The ambassador and his body guards, who wore specially tailored civilian clothes to hide their weapons, were hardly noticed as they walked to the villa until they were stopped by "Vietnamese Cowboys", young kids with carbines. The marines locked and loaded. The armed kids retreated.

At the villa, Broussard reported that the marines burned classified materials and used thermite grenades to destroy sensitive items. Broussard wrote that he ". . . got the back-up Pontiac (staff car) running and radioed Jim (Daisey) to get him (Ambassador Martin) out . . . Jim put the ambassador in the back seat and laid over him . . . I rammed the (ambassador's) residence eight foot gates with the armor-plated vehicle and sped to the French Embassy."

During the morning of the 29th. General Van Tien Dung, who had succeed North Vietnam's ailing top military leader, General Vo Nguyen Giap, issued an order that all Americans must be out of the country by 6:00PM or Saigon would face a devastating bombardment. Concerned with this threat, South Vietnam's President Big Minh, in office less than twenty-four hours, ordered that the Americans leave.

Late Monday evening (Tuesday morning in Saigon.) the President approved activation of operation "Frequent Wind", the code for Option IV of the evacuation plan—cease fixed-wing flights and use helicopters only. In response to the President's decision, just before 11:00AM on the 29th, Armed Forces Radio in Saigon made the following announcement: "The temperature is 105 degrees and rising."

Immediately following the announcement, the station played and continued to play Tennessee Ernie Ford's recording of "White Christmas". [It was widely reported by the media that Bing Crosby was the recording artist of the record played. The disc jockey who actually played the record later reported that he could not find the Bing Crosby version and thus played Ernie Ford's recording.]

The playing of "White Christmas" was the signal for the all-out evacuation from Vietnam by helicopters of the 7th Fleet, the USAF and the CIA. At 1215 hours, "Frequent Wind", was implemented, but the helicopters marshaled to participate in the operation were delayed due to a misunderstanding among the various command units about the exact time the final evacuation would begin. The final evacuation process began almost three hours late. The clock was ticking.

No one believed that General Dung's ultimatum of having all Americans out by 6:00PM could be met but every effort was made. Helicopter flights continued with many crews flying up to 18 hours during evacuations without rest. Busses were used to pick up Americans from prearranged locations. Volunteer American drivers were used and marine security guards provided escort service, and for good reason given the mobs that hampered the bus evacuations. Sergeant Kevin Maloney wrote, "As bodyguards we memorized street names and routes to various locations . . . Marine Captain Anthony Wood and I led convoy after convoy of busses through the streets of Saigon . . . We played a nerve racking game of "chicken" with ARVN road blocks. America was running out on them and we were leading the parade."

Millions of dollars and classified documents from the US Agency for International Development, the DAO and the embassy were destroyed by the marines in burn barrels using thermite grenades. The Marine Security Guards transported Dottie Martin from the villa for her evacuation. The ambassa-

dor would not leave. He returned to the villa, this time bringing Nit Noy the poodle with him.

Meanwhile, as reported by then Master Sergeant John Valdez, "Americans trying to flee found themselves unable to get exit visas for their wife and children unless they were willing to pay bribes." As generally reported, twenty dollar visas were selling for \$2,000. A seat on a stolen plane was \$5,000 or more. Countless bribe demands were made of those attempting to flee.

Operation Frequent Wind continued into the night on the 29th. Near midnight, the evacuation work and destruction of documents at DAO was done. Marines who left last used thermite grenades to destroy communications gear at the DAO. Helicopters from Task Force 76 made continuous round trips to and from various ships of the Seventh Fleet located in the South China Sea to the embassy's roof and grounds. For safety of the aircrews, consideration was given by Seventh Fleet to end evacuations at 11:00PM. In response to the plan to end flights, a marine general reportedly notified the navy admirals involved that he would file charges against any officer who ordered flights stopped while his marines remained in Saigon.

Saigon, Wednesday, April 30, 1975

Two more Americans lost their life at sea during the final hours of the evacuation. Swift One-Four, YT-14 of CV-19 went down in the South China Sea. The crew chief and door gunner were rescued but Marine Captain Bill Nystil and 1st Lieutenant Mike Shea were lost, the last to die at the end of the Vietnam era.

The flights continued. At about 2:00AM Saigon time there were still 760 people to be evacuated. Nineteen more flights were scheduled and Washington ordered that Ambassador Martin leave on the last flight, estimated to depart about 3:45AM on the morning

of April 30th. Helicopter crews braved the dangers of overloading, sniper fire and dangerous flying conditions such as landing in the small embassy parking area with only headlights from cars and on the embassy's roof with only the light from a 35mm slide projector. They also had to contend with tear gas that drifted up to their pad above the embassy roof.

While final flights were taking place, a Flash message was sent from the embassy to Washington that read, "Plan to close mission at about 0430 30 April local time. Due to necessity to destroy comm gear, this is last message from embassy Saigon."

Just before 5:00AM on April 30th, Captain Gerald Berry landed his C-46 Sea Knight, call sign "Lady Ace Zero-Niner" on the pad atop the embassy roof. His orders were not to leave without the ambassador. Below in his third floor suite, Ambassador Martin was still not prepared to leave. Very sick and fatigued, the ambassador was finally persuaded to leave and was assisted up to the helicopter by his Marine Security Guards. The ambassador and key staff left at 4:58AM. Captain Berry announced by radio "tiger, tiger, tiger", code word for the ambassador's flight. He then informed his superiors by message that read "Lady Ace 09 has the ambassador and his immediate staff on board . . . they are moving the GSF (Ground Support Force Marines) to the roof top for pickup."

With the ambassador evacuated, Seventh Fleet and Secretary Kissinger in Washington assumed erroneously that all Americans were out and the evacuation completed. Not so. Marine security guards remained atop the roof. They had retreated up the stairs of the embassy, locked the elevator on the top floor, locked and barricaded the doors from the stairwell, and used CS gas to hold back the onslaught of Vietnamese attempting to escape Saigon. The crowd had used a water truck to batter down a door of the embassy where they entered and filled the stair-

wells in an attempt to make their way to the roof.

Now, the marines found themselves waiting for an evacuation flight that didn't come. The oversight was finally noted and Marine helicopter Swift-Two-Two from Squadron HMM-164 was dispatched to pick up the last eleven marines. The last flight from the embassy with eleven marines aboard departed at 7:58AM. According to Chris Woods, crew chief aboard, "As we were on short final (to embassy rooftop) . . . I moved to the cabin door to make sure the helicopter was over the pad . . . I remember thinking that standing in the door I was a target and could possibly get shot . . . and I also remember thoughts of my wife and 2 1/2 year old daughter." Referring to take off after loading the last eleven marines, Woods wrote, "We lifted into a hover but had to set back down on the helo pad because the pilots were overcome by CS gas . . . (later) along the river, I sighted approximately eight communist tanks, parked side by side . . . my heart rate increased (until) I realized that their turrets were not tracking us. I learned later that the tanks were waiting until 8:00AM to enter the city."

Approximately two hours after Swift Two-Two left the embassy roof, North Vietnamese in tanks were headed for the Presidential Palace. Interestingly, they didn't know where it was and had to seek directions. At about 10:00AM two Soviet T-54 tanks reached the palace gates about the same time. Tank # 843 rammed the gates but got stuck. Tank # 390 drove around it and into the palace grounds. Waiting at the palace, Big Minh purportedly said to the victors, "We have been waiting for you to hand over power." To which the communists replied, "You are our prisoners. You must surrender unconditionally. There is nothing to hand over." A few minutes later, Big Minh was taken to a radio station where he ordered that South Vietnam's military lay down their arms and cease fire. The flag of the Provisional Revolutionary Govern-

ment was flying over the presidential palace by 12:15PM on April 30. Within twenty-four hours, Saigon had been renamed Ho Chi Minh City.

Epilogue

According to Global Security, more than 50,000 were evacuated overall, including 122 helicopter flights from the DAO and 72 flights from the embassy that transported 7,806 evacuees during Frequent Wind.

In his book, *Decent Interval*, Frank Snepp, the CIA's chief strategy analyst in Saigon until he evacuated, described the feelings of Don Hays: "As the big CH-53 lunged up over the edge of the compound . . . (Hays) took one final look at Tan Son Nhut. As far as he could see, the airfield was littered with fireballs, each going from blue to green to brilliant white as it rolled its way through the rows of parked aircraft." These feelings echo what the feelings might have been had we seen Tan Son Nhut destroyed.

In correspondence to the Fall of Saigon Marines Association (see www.fallofusaigon.org) former Secretary of State Kissinger wrote, ". . . on the day the last helicopter left the roof of the embassy, only a feeling of emptiness remained. Those of us who fought the battles to avoid the final disaster were too close to the tragedy to review the history of twenty years of American involvement. And now it was too late to alter the course of events."

President Ford, in his letter to Master Sergeant Colin Broussard, USMC (Ret) wrote that "April 1975 was indeed the cruelest month. The passage of time has not dulled the ache of those days, the saddest of my public life."

Continuing, President Ford wrote, ". . . History will judge whether we could have done better. One thing, however, is beyond question—the heroism of the Marines who guarded the embassy during its darkest hours, and of those brave helicopter pilots who flew non-stop missions for 18 hours,

dodging relentless sniper fire to land on an embassy roof illuminated by nothing more than a 35mm slide projector.”

He added, “The Ford Museum has assumed stewardship of the Saigon stairs (portable stairs leading to the landing pad atop the embassy) in the name of such people (souls of free people). It is my hope that one day it (staircase) will return to a Vietnam that is free. Until then, let us honor the millions of brave men and women who honored us through their valor and sacrifice. May God bless you and them, now and always.”

On the occasion of this thirtieth anniversary of the fall of Tan Son Nhut, Saigon and the government of the Republic of Vietnam, the feelings of those of us who served are expressed in this final quote from President Ford’s letter to the Fall of Saigon Marines Association:

“We did the best we could.”

My service at TSN was in 67-68; therefore, I got most of the information for this article from marines and aircrews who were there, from news accounts and from books about the fall of Saigon. If you would like to receive a bibliography of my references, e-mail me at norville@direcway.com or write to 588 Lake Caroline Drive, Ruther Glen, VA 22546. (Send SASE)



Lines of refugees, many of whom never got out



Major Jim Kean and Marine Security guards on embassy roof during evacuation



Recreation area at embassy trashed by those seeking evacuation on April 30, 1975



0758 Hours, Wednesday, April 30, 1975. Last flight from embassy roof. Helo call sign was “Swift 2-2.” Major Kean is in the center of the photo.

I am pleased to announce that the membership has overwhelmingly accepted the Adobe PDF electronic format for Revetments. This will mean a huge savings for the Association. A hard copy of Revetments will still be mailed to those members that do not have Internet access.

Friends, a reminder that the sale of BX items is what gives us financial flexibility. The profits go into maintaining a maintenance fund. The CD has been a huge success, and the sale of the 8 inch patch has been good—not great like I expected. If you haven't ordered yours yet—please do. It's a beautiful patch. Most members that purchased the patch had it framed for their den or office.

Your friend,

Wayne Salisbury



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