

Pacifican looks back on the Fall of Saigon

By JEAN BARTLETT | THE WEEK OF 7-23-18–7-29-18



(Jean Bartlett photo)

Huong "Rose" Nieves at her home in Pacifica, California.

As Huong (Nguyen) Nieves, the eldest of the 12 children of Thi Ba and Van The Nguyen, tells the story of her last days in Saigon, the words spill out. It was April of 1975. Huong, which translates to Rose, was married to retired U.S. Army Sergeant Ruben Nieves. He was waiting for her in San Francisco. Paperwork complications kept Huong and their son Jimmy, almost 3, in South Vietnam. Huong and Jimmy lived with her family in Gia Dinh, a province which surrounded Saigon.

"My husband learned Saigon was going to fall," Nieves said. "He got word to us, 'Leave Saigon.' I went daily to the U.S. Embassy. But no one could help us."

On April 29, Nieves' cousin Liem Nguyen arrived by motorcycle at Nieves' family home. Huong and her mom were preparing a feast to mark the anniversary of her brother's death. He was killed at 18, shortly after enlisting.

"Liem said his mother and father, and all of his siblings were at the airport. He told me, 'Grab your son. You must leave now.'"

Scared, hurried, Nieves packed a small bag. Her father said he would take her and Jimmy on his scooter. They followed Liem. On the way, Huong's father's scooter ran out of gas. Her father had no money so Huong gave him all the money she had. Then she and Jimmy climbed on Liem's motorcycle and sped to Tan Son Nhut, Saigon's airport. That was the last time she saw her father.

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Liem dropped Huong and Jimmy off at an office. Then he headed back to where his family waited. Hours went by. No one helped Nieves. She spotted a U.S. officer. She told him her story. She burst into tears. The officer got their paperwork moving and later helped them get on the van that drove them to a waiting helicopter.

"When the van started going, I heard tapping. My uncle reached in and handed me 40 dollars. He knew I didn't have any money. He also gave me two sandwiches and some fruit. Jimmy and I hadn't eaten since we left Gia Dinh that morning."

Nieves found out much later, her uncle was stopped after he handed her the cash. Someone thought he was committing a bribe. He and his family were detained.

"Then my uncle was injured. He was rushed to the hospital and was gone so long that my aunt decided to take everyone home. The next day, my uncle went from the hospital to the airport. He thought his family was in Guam and got on a ship to meet them. His son Liem, who now lives in Dallas, Texas, did get out. On the 30th, Liem and one of his sisters rode their bikes to the airport and somehow got on the last helicopter. They ran into their father in a food line in Guam."

As to Huong's father, he and his wife saw a plane go down on April 29. They thought Huong and Jimmy were on it. It would be two years before any of Huong's letters would find them.

"Sitting on the floor next to the helicopter pilot, Jimmy and I fled Saigon. First we went to Manila and then to Guam. We stayed in Guam for one week. Then we went to San Diego."



They were brought to a tent city set up at Camp Pendleton. Nieves was spotted by Channel 4 reporters and she agreed to be interviewed. There was so much to her story. She met her husband Ruben in 1968 when she worked as a maid at the Columbia BEQ in Saigon, a bachelor's quarters for noncommissioned U.S. officers. Born in Puerto Rico, Ruben was also a veteran of the Korean War. Huong did not speak much English but she learned enough so Ruben could pick up snacks for her family from the PX. Huong's father did not approve of Ruben. He was a GI. What would the neighbors think? But he grew to love the kind sergeant, and when Huong and Ruben married on November 11, 1970, it was in her family's home. In 1972, Ruben and Huong's son Jimmy was born.

At the end of the interview, one of the reporters helped Huong get a message to her husband that she had arrived.

"I left the message with my husband's niece. I didn't know what would happen. My English was not good. But the next morning, I heard my name over the loudspeaker. My husband, his niece and her husband, and two other people had jumped in a big car and driven straight to San Diego. My husband and I cried so much. We were all finally together."

The family lived in San Francisco and their second son, Mike, was born in 1979. In 1982, Nieves got a telegram. Her father had died. In 1987, the family moved to Pacifica. In 1992, more than 17 years after leaving Saigon, Nieves went home for a visit.

"When I arrived, all my siblings looked different. They were so young when I left. But it was wonderful. I have gone back three more times, including to bury my mother in 2000."

Many Pacificans know Nieves from the 14 years she worked at Humphrey's Restaurant, now Raymond's Chinese Cuisine on Palmetto. She retired to take care of her beloved husband who died in 2008. The proud mother of two and grandmother of four can often be seen walking along the Sharp Park Promenade.

"I never would have imagined when I was a child that I would leave my homeland. But I was so lucky to meet Ruben. I loved him with all my heart and still do. As to my cousin Liem, he will always be my hero."



A Bartlett's Biographies Headliner

Jean Bartlett is a longtime Bay Area features writer: Pacifica Tribune, Oakland Tribune, San Jose Mercury, San Mateo Times, Portraits & Roots, Marin Independent Journal, Twin City Times, Ross Valley Reporter, Peninsula Progress, Coastal Connections, Contra Costa County Times, Bay Area Business Woman and Catholic San Francisco.