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# The Washington Post Magazine



**A REPORTER'S DIARY**

**SAIGON'S LAST DAYS**

BY PHIL MCCOMBS

**THE BRAVE AND THE  
DESPERATE**

**INTERVIEWS WITH  
SURVIVORS**

BY LARRY ENGELMANN

**FEAR AFTER  
THE FALL**

**A FAMILY HIDES  
FOR NINE YEARS**

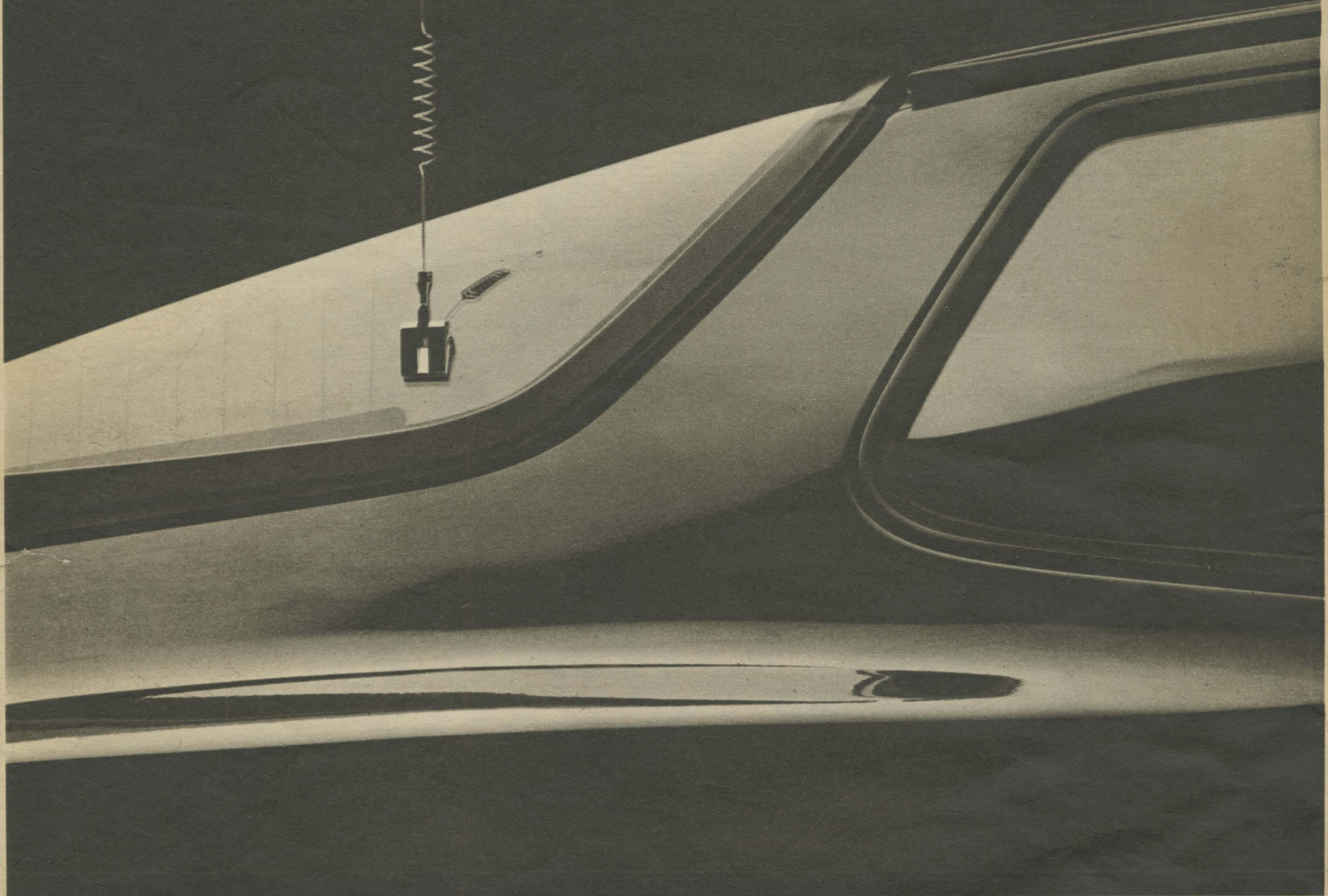
BY LENA SUN

# VIETNAM

*'I remember and I cry'*

April 21, 1985

# A Tail Of Two Cities.



For David Novak, the toughest part of every workday is *getting to work*.

David is an Account Representative with a brokerage firm in Alexandria. But he lives in downtown Baltimore, 65 miles from the office.

Each year he spends 750 hours just commuting between these two cities. That's the equivalent of nineteen 40-hour work weeks!

In David's line of work, fortunes can be won and lost in minutes. So it's staggering to think what could happen in nineteen weeks.

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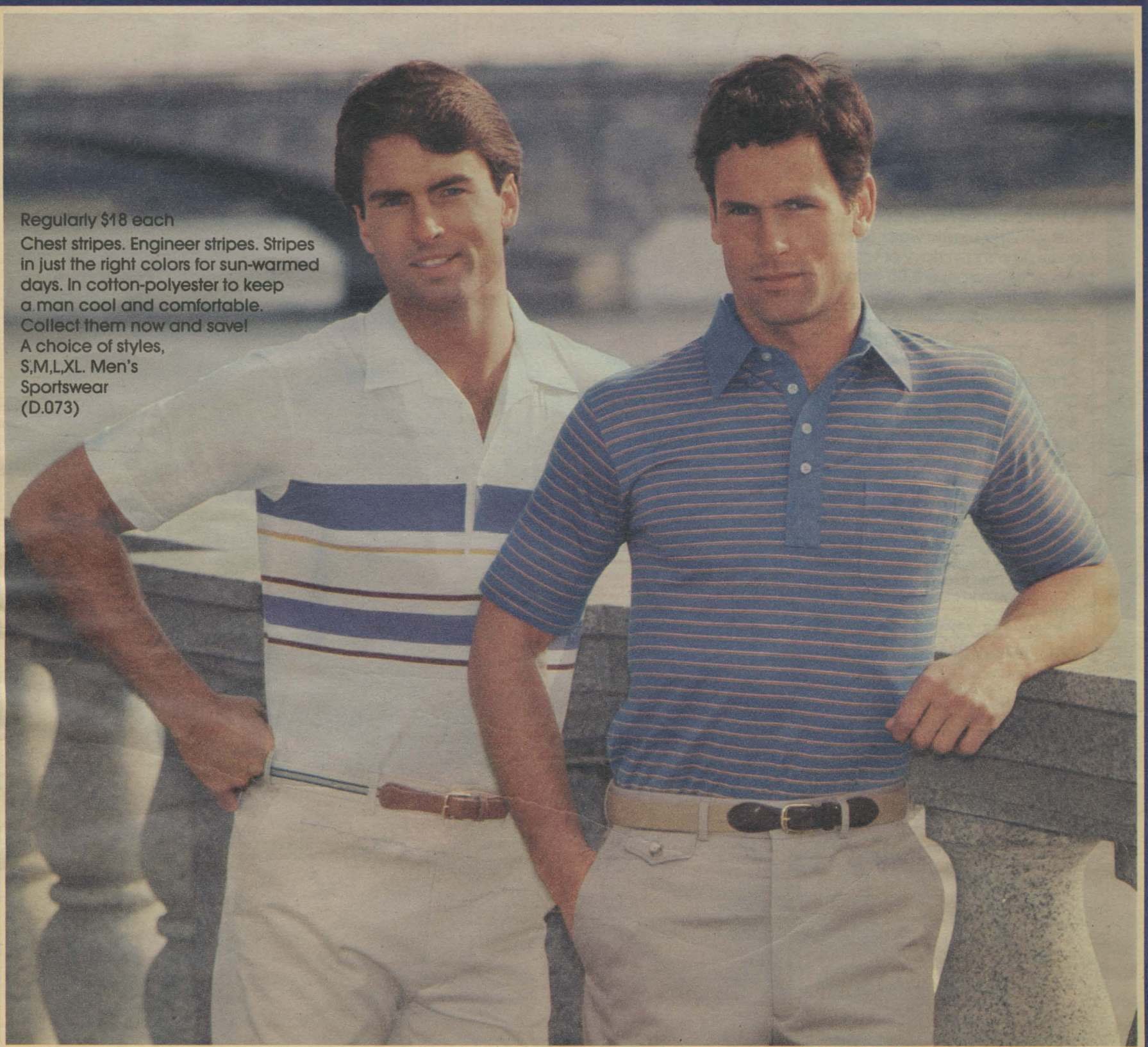
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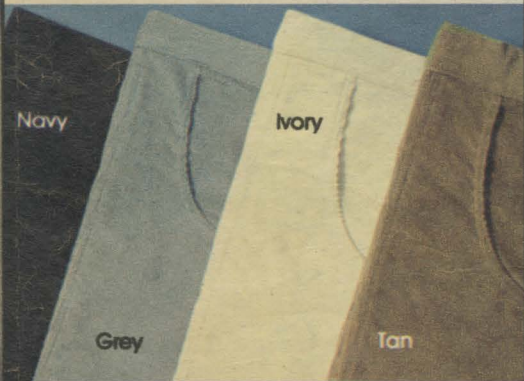
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## The Washington Post Magazine



BY NIK WHEELER/BLACK STAR

**Crowds form outside the U.S. Embassy in Saigon.**

**IN MARCH AND APRIL** of 1975, in South Vietnam, it became increasingly apparent that communist forces were gaining and that the country would soon fall. The city of Saigon was a microcosm of the nation's chaos. In this issue: some who were caught up in that nation's closing weeks and one family forced to stay behind.

### **STRANGLEHOLD**

By Phil McCombs

A Post correspondent witnesses the crumbling of a nation as the North Vietnamese close in on Saigon.

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Cover photograph of refugees on the South China Sea  
by Nik Wheeler/Gamma Liaison

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April 21, 1985

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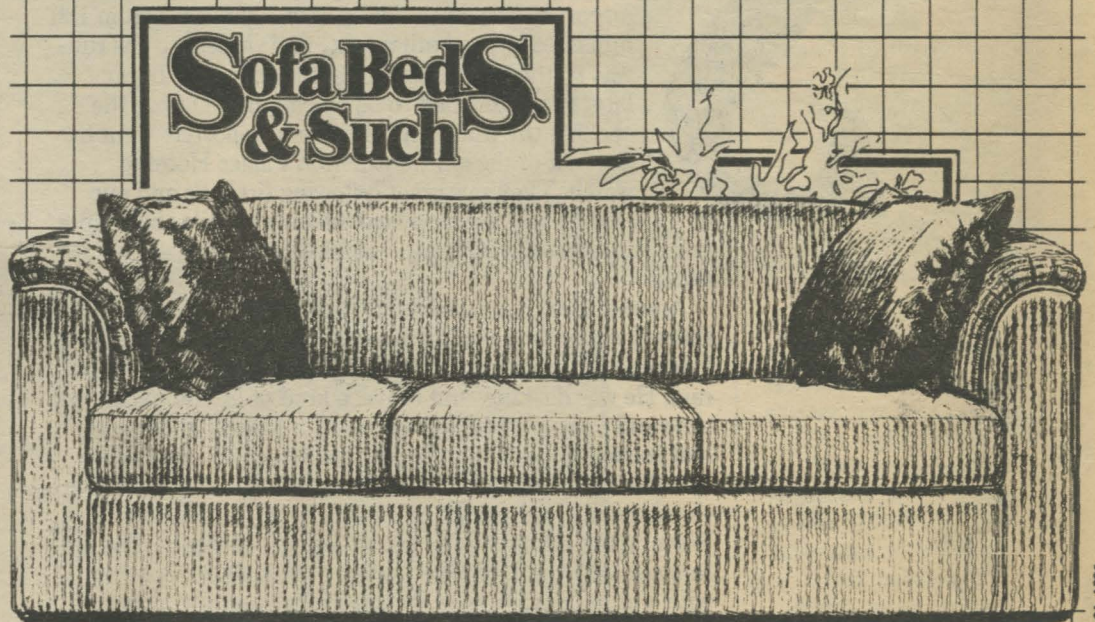
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# Stranglehold

A reporter's personal story of Saigon's final weeks ■ BY PHIL McCOMBS

**S**AIAGON: On the last day I was there, April 29, 1975, the North Vietnamese Army shelled Tansonnhut airport before dawn. Hit it with 300 rounds from 130 mm guns located miles away and ripped up the runway so that the American evacuation that began later in the day had to be by chopper. During the shelling the whole city shook and reporters went to the roof of the old Continental Palace Hotel to watch. They saw great billowing fireballs and one said he saw a Strela heat-seeking missile shoot up and disintegrate an airplane. I slept through the whole thing.

Another Post correspondent, Dave Greenway, was up there. I was a 30-year-old bureau chief and Greenway was a longtime Indochina hand who would never miss a dawn raid. He was dashing, and brave, a kind of legend in his own time and I was glad he was in town. In March when things had started to heat up in Indochina, Greenway had been vacationing in Switzerland. A messenger had found him on the ski slopes and passed on a cable from Post editors in Washington asking him to get to Saigon "soonest." The editors also sent out Don Oberdorfer, a diplomatic reporter with Vietnam experience. I picked him up at the airport in mid-March and as we drove into Saigon's hot smoky sprawl, I remember how he mused that every country has its own moods and smells. Saigon, he said, smelled "lemony."

I had a cook, baby amah, interpreter, political analyst, secretary and office girl—all Vietnamese. They had husbands, wives, children, parents, brothers, sisters and grandparents. All these people wanted to escape their homeland during the final weeks as North Vietnamese divisions rolled south. But the government didn't want citizens leaving for fear it would trigger a rout. The executive editor of the

paper, Ben Bradlee, sent \$25,000 in \$100 bills to buy a boat, charter a plane, pay bribes, whatever was necessary to get our employes out. Before we had to use it, a secret semi-official airlift was set up for Americans and the Vietnamese who had worked for them.

It was kept secret because Saigon was near panic. For a couple of weeks I spent little time reporting and long hours helping Post employes and their relatives escape on the airlift. I gave them wads of the \$100 bills to help them through the refugee camps. The way it worked, nobody knew when a flight would go until a call came saying "Now!" Then I had to reach people fast. Sometimes they had to be hidden to get past guards at the airport gate. I remember driving frantically with one woman and her kids trying to locate her husband. We found him by chance. Then, as we screeched to a halt on the airstrip the family had to run pell-mell to make the flight. When I called my political analyst and said "Now!" he said, "I can't." He said his mother, who didn't want him to leave, had kidnaped his child to prevent it. Later I learned he had been a communist all along. The baby amah decided to stay for family reasons. The "office girl" lives in Washington and is swinging a good-sized real estate deal.

THE FALL OF SAIGON came quick and it was a big story. At the beginning of the year there had been a lull in



*SPEECH TO THE NATION:  
President Thieu on television.*

PHIL McCOMBS,  
a reporter for the  
Style section of  
The Post, was  
chief of The Post's  
Saigon bureau in  
April 1975.