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How Richard Pena landed on the 'Last Plane Out of Saigon' Resize text A | A | A

Austin lawyer was really unlucky, then really lucky.

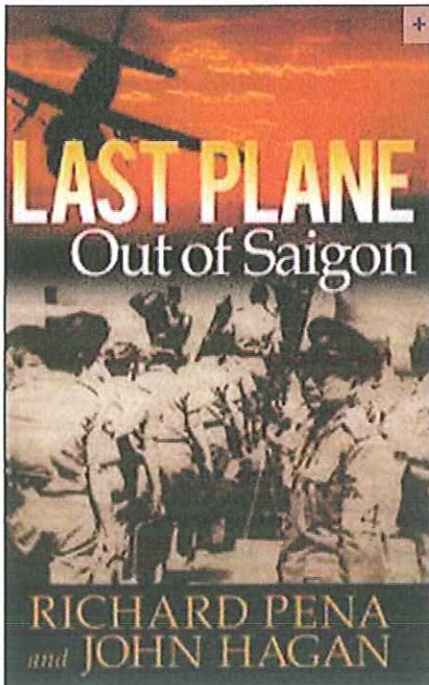
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By Michael Barnes - American-Statesman Staff

In 1972, the Austin lawyer – his family doesn't use tilde over the "n" in Pena – was among the very last American draftees sent to the Vietnam War. It was going badly for the U.S. and its allies.

Vietnam. Good luck soldier."



Book jacket for Richard Pena's 'Last Plane Out of Saigon.'

On March 29, 1973, he was among the very last American combat troops evacuated from Saigon.

That's the subject of his brief memoir, "Last Plane Out of Saigon," released earlier this year.

"The Paris Peace Treaty said we'd be out of Vietnam in 60 days," Pena says over subway sandwiches in his law offices near Interstate 35 and Ben White Boulevard. "The commander came by and gave everybody an 'X + number,' which

stood for the day we'd leave. I got X + 59. Later, they said, can we have that back? You gonna be X + 61. You are going to turn the lights out on



Lawyer Richard Pena.

The American military indeed proved that they could evacuate a country in 60 days, although they left behind a lot of equipment and local allies.

"Flights came in and out constantly," Pena recalls. "Finally, there were two American planes left on the runway. We were

walking toward our planes and a rumor circulated that the South Vietnamese had stormed the gates and were coming with machetes and guns. Were they mad because we were leaving, or because we were there to begin with?"

The road to Vietnam

Pena, now 66, grew up in San Antonio. His father was a postman, while his mother worked as a civilian at Kelly Air Force Base. Their lives often revolved around athletics at church and school.

"My parents had their rules and we abided by the rules," Pena says.

"Neither of them went to college. They respected doctors and lawyers. When I told them I was going to law school, it made their day. When I became a lawyer, they were overjoyed. And when I became president of the State Bar of Texas, they were ecstatic."

Like other University of Texas students who arrived in Austin during the summer of 1966, among his earliest memories was Charles Whitman shooting from the University of Texas Tower.

"It was a neat town, a little town back then," Pena says. "If you went to Lamar Boulevard, it was like going to another city. If we went to Lake Travis for an outing, it was for the whole day. Now I live out there."

Pena registered for the draft back home in San Antonio. A bad sign: His local board had won an award for inducting the most draftees. He was called up his senior year at UT, but won a year's deferment to attend law school.

"Then I got a notice," he says. "You're in the Army now! I wasn't a big fan of the war. But I took my chances."

Instead of choosing officer candidate school, which would commit him to four years of service, he selected a two-year program that led to training as an operating room specialist.

"You've seen M.A.S.H.?" he says. "It's kinda like M.A.S.H. We were cleaning, sterilizing, helping. People got injured in the field, they were helicoptered in, and we'd take them into the operating room. That was our life."

Although the war was winding down quickly, he was assigned to the 3rd Field Hospital in South Vietnam.

"It was June of 1972," he says. "Nixon had proclaimed that no more Americans would go. My assignment said: 'RVN.' What's that? Republic of Vietnam. I thought nobody was going. They said: 'You are buddy. Get your affairs in order. Make a will. Say your goodbyes.'"

Not a good time to go, if there ever was one for Americans. The North Vietnamese and Vietcong were bearing down on Saigon. When it was time to leave, enemy soldiers lined the runway.

"Those of us left walked the gauntlet of Vietnamese soldiers onto the last two planes," he says. "As I was getting on my plane, I noticed a little Vietnamese soldier that appeared as if he had just come out of the jungle, taking a picture of us getting on the plane. I thought that picture would be important one day."

A chance encounter

After several months "in country," Pena had started writing a journal.

"In this war, as in others, what one experiences and witnesses would be unbelievable in normal society and often surreal," he says. "I felt there was a story that needed to be told."

Safely back in Austin, Pena finished law school and opened a solo practice out of his duplex.

"Only years later, on reflection, did I realize how hard that was," he says. "Had an old jalopy for a car, a phone, a desk, one suit, two shirts. Had to tie the driver's door on the Vega with a string."

Acting as his own secretary, he'd always agree to meet perspective clients at their places.

"I didn't want them to see the office or the car," he says with a smile. "I'd park a block away. Later, I'd figure it all out at the law library."

One day, a client asked how much he owed Pena.

"Oh, I get paid!" he realized. "I said: 'I don't know. I'll be back.' I built the practice that way."

He now heads a firm with more than a dozen employees that focuses on personal injury law and workman's comp.

In 2003, Pena led a legal delegation to Vietnam. There, his group shared thoughts about the law with the country's lawyers and judges. While touring the War Remnants Museum in Ho Chi Minh City, he noticed a black-and-white image on the wall.

"It was a picture of me and some other American soldiers getting on one of the last planes on the runway in 1973," he says. "The inscription under the photo was: 'Last Plane Out.'"

That experience inspired Pena to tell his story, based on the journal entries of a 24-year-old draftee, to writer John Hagan. After going

through Pena's notes, Hagan responded: "America needs to read these."