



Saigon

by **Richard Shand**

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I traveled through the city several times on the way to and from fire support bases in the Delta. The following impressions show the strange unreality of a city that remained strangely detached from the fighting that surrounded it.

The heat bores into each pore of the skin, baking the bones and cooking the brain under my helmet pot in a slow simmer. I am perched on the fender of 24 1/2 tons of GM craftsmanship; 700 horses grinding my ear bones into a soft white powder. Mick Jagger sunglasses perched on my nose, cigarillo clenched between my teeth like Clint Eastwood and thump gun on my lap, I am ready to see Saigon.

Past shacks and sampans flushes up against the banks of the canal in Cholon, past French colonial mansions secluded behind banana trees and barbed wire, to the center of the city we roll where low rise kilns of plastered cinder block front the pavement. The traffic is moderately heavy - pedicabs, bicycles, three wheeled Lambrettas packed with people and U.S. Army 3/4 ton trucks weave in and out. Everywhere there are knotted doll figures:

- An old woman steps off and on the curb over and over again, trying to cross a busy intersection, her eyes wide and her mouth open.
- A cao boi wearing a black Stetson and denim jacket, thumbs jammed into his pockets, leans against a bar front.
- A brown legged boy with a wooden toy rifle runs for all he's worth.
- A young woman with porcelain face and narrow hips, dressed in a pink bao dai and wide brimmed straw hat, hurries across the street.

All the people. They are distant from me and I view them through the wrong end of a telescope. Their images become smaller and smaller, shrinking into blobs of light that

wink into nothingness, until I am aware only of the noise rising from the engine and the heat rattling off the sky.

[Back to Vietnam Memoirs](#)