

The Raid on Tansonnhut

The Sound of Bombs in the Late Afternoon

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SAIGON, April 28—The bombs fell on Tansonnhut in the late afternoon soon after the first real thunderstorm of the season had swept over Saigon. We knew it wasn't thunder—too sharp a sound—but what?

Out on the rain-washed streets, people were hurrying home at the end of the day when the entire city seemed to erupt in gunfire. The sound bounced off the walls of buildings, sending pedestrians scurrying for the corners and doorways.

Some of the fire was from anti-aircraft guns from the palace and machine guns from the rooftops. We could see the tracers pouring up in languid arcs trying to reach an A-37 fighter-bomber that seemed to be circling overhead.

A C-130 transport plane, low and straining for altitude like a fat duck, came in from another direction and the tracers turned on it. The startled pilot, probably

coming in for a landing, banked and got away.

We found out later that several A-37s had bombed Tansonnhut airfield, but whether the deed was done by disgruntled South Vietnamese pilots or whether it was the first North Vietnamese air raid of the war is still not known.

A Vietnamese stewardess said that Air Vietnam's Boeing was just boarding for Bangkok when the planes struck. They bombed a bay of transport planes and the stewardess said she looked across to see a "sea of fire." The passengers all scrambled for the terminal and lay on the floor. The Boeing took off without them.

Shortly after the bombing, an expert in aviation pointed out to me what he said was a Mig-21, a Soviet-built fighter used by the North Vietnamese, wheeling in the sunset-lit sky. It had been a day of Mig sightings. Reporters had said they had

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seen a Mig make a pass over Saigon in the morning and the South Vietnamese air force reportedly picked up Migs on their radar, but none of the reports could really be confirmed.

In Saigon on this day, with power passing to the republic's third president in a week, no one knows what to expect, or what is happening, what was rumor and what was real.

The faces of the Saigoneses, pressed into the gutter and lying on sidewalks as the furious fire crackled in waves overhead, showed dismay and fear. It is a population that has lived on the near side of pac for weeks. Now it seemed as if all control was gone.

One wire service immediately reported heavy street fighting in Saigon with North Vietnamese invaders. Another source said the planes had strafed the cathedral. Neither story proved true.

Shortly afterward the firing stopped. Soldiers appeared and started stringing barbed wire across the street near the Washington

Post office. They looked frightened and jumpy—better to keep away from them.

A South Vietnamese officer, apparently enraged when a taxi stalled and did not move on his command, took out his .45 automatic and shot at the driver, fortunately missing him.

Mike Marriott, an Australian cameraman working for CBS, was filming the scene; later the officer pointed his pistol at Marriott's head. According to Marriott, the pistol somehow failed to fire and the officer began to beat Marriott with it, opening up a scalp wound. Marriott turned and fled.

It had been a day of disorientation. On the Newport Bridge, where the Bienhoa highway crosses the Dongnai River, you could lie on the crest of the bridge in the morning and watch the Vietcong shooting at you from the far bank, not a mile from the outskirts of the city.

Yesterday the bridge had been crowded with traffic going back and forth. Today not a vehicle moved, and nervous South Vietnamese paratroopers crept around the approaches to the bridge

or peered cautiously over the side.

Early in the morning, the Vietcong, probably no more than 20 men, had moved in and taken the bridgehead on the other side of the river. Their instructions must have been to hold as long as possible. By mid-morning they were deployed off to the sides and under the bridge itself.

A couple of companies of South Vietnamese paratroopers were put into the area around 9 a.m., and helicopter gunships circled overhead looking for targets. When they found one they would dart down and fire off a salvo of rockets that would explode with a great flash and roar, kicking up brown dust and smoke.

But when it was over, from time to time, you could see one of the Vietcong, dressed in black, rise from cover and dart to a new location. To show their defiance, the Vietcong would fire half a clip of automatic rifle rounds at the paratroopers, the bullets hitting the bridge or passing harmlessly overhead in the hot, humid air.

Behind was the skyline of

Saigon. Off to the left was the American-built river port with its commissary, where only days before large American contractors could go in and carry out bundles of American groceries at the big American supermarket.

In the river lay the barges with their rocket screens, which used to make the passage up to Phnom Penh. They are idle now that the Cambodian war is lost. This one seems so close to being lost.

The soldiers were about to cross the river and come on the Vietcong from behind, but none seemed to want to die this late in the war and nobody seemed in much of a hurry.

The Vietcong at the Newport Bridge and the rockets that earlier set two warehouses ablaze have showed that the river port can be closed and that Saigon, like Phnom Penh before it, is being surrounded and cut off.

The day ended with sound trucks circling through the city announcing a 24-hour curfew and telling people to go home, to shut their doors, and to listen to the radio. All is uncertainty. Everyone is afraid.