

Eyewitness Says Da Nang Gave Up Without a Fight

By Georges Herbouze
Agence France-Presse

Saigon

There never was a last battle for Da Nang.

That is the testimony of a teacher who flew over the doomed city during the hours before the Communists moved in, clutching the landing skid of a helicopter after a dramatic last-minute rescue.

Alain Pottier, a Frenchman who taught at Da Nang, said thousands of South Vietnamese troops gave up without a fight, surrendering themselves, their weapons and Da Nang's vast stocks of military equipment to the North Vietnamese Army and the soldiers of the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam.

The surrender came after government commanders lost control of their disorganized and utterly demoralized men, many of whom

Back Page Col. 1

From Page 1

had fled Hue in search of safety at Da Nang.

Uniformed soldiers extorted money from the townspeople and looted shops and warehouses in order to sell the stolen food and merchandise, Pottier said.

Troops in the grip of hysteria opened fire indiscriminately and the bodies of men, women and children lay sprawled in the streets, killed by random shooting.

Pottier said he had carried a 5-year-old boy with a bullet through his throat to a nearby dentist because there was no doctor in the neighborhood.

After a few minutes, the boy died.

A timid attempt was made to re-establish some sort of order on the eve of the Communist attack, Pottier said.

Soldiers were ordered to return to their barracks and an order was issued specifying that any found in the city would be disarmed and executed on the spot.

But the next morning, a colonial from the barracks near Da Nang's French Cul-

tural Center confided in Pottier: "I have no more troops. My men have all left." The missing men were Marines, members of one of South Vietnam's elite units.

During the night, soldiers pillaged the local Air Vietnam offices, looting passengers' luggage storage there.

The Communists attacked Da Nang from two sides, Pottier said. They struck from the north and at Noi An, 20 miles south of the city on Highway 1, the ill-starred "Street Without Joy" leading to Saigon.

"But in reality, the attackers did no more than fire about 40 rockets at the city and the airport," Pottier said. "After that, they just waited for the city to give up without a fight."

On Saturday morning, men in civilian clothes belonging to the Communist National Liberation Front drove in cars through the streets of Da Nang with megaphones, disregarding the government divisions still in nominal control of the city.

The Liberation Army is coming," they declared. "Stay calm and decorate

your homes with Buddhist or Roman Catholic flags."

At that time, only the forward scouts of the Communist strike force could be spotted about three miles from Da Nang, Pottier said.

The main body of troops remained hidden behind Marble Mountain, which overlooks the bay.

Pottier very nearly did not escape from Da Nang.

At about 11 a.m. on the

morning of the attack, a helicopter belonging to Air America, an airline working for U.S. government agencies, flew over the heart of the city looking for Al Francis, the American consul in Da Nang, who had found other means of escape.

Spotting the French Tricolor draped over the cultural center, the pilot dropped a message scrawled on the side of an army rations box.

The message told the French in the center to go to the city's heliport to be picked up. But they were driven back by gunfire from government soldiers at the landing zone.

Back at the Cultural Center, Pottier managed to grasp hold of the helicopter's landing skid as the pilot hovered six feet off the ground. Then Pottier hoisted himself onto the skid as the pilot skimmed the rooftops.

A young Eurasian Frenchman clung to the other skid. They clung there for several minutes before crewmen helped them scramble into the aircraft.

The helicopter circled Da Nang for several hours at high altitude while govern-

ment troops below opened fire at them.

Hundreds of bodies littered the airport tarmac, Pottier said. Some had been killed by rockets, but others were shot down by government soldiers who fought to prevent refugees from approaching rescue aircraft so that they could put their own families on board.

Still others were shot down by the aircraft as they clustered around them, refusing to allow them to take off, Pottier said.