

Gunfire and Thunder

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Saigon

Bombs fell on Tan Son Nhut Airport in the late afternoon soon after the first real thunderstorm of the season had swept over Saigon.

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 bouncing off the walls of buildings sending pedestrians scurrying for the corners and doorways.

Antiaircraft guns, for sure, from the palace and machine guns from the rooftops, for we could see the tracers pouring up, trying to reach a U.S.-built A-37 fighter-bomber that seemed to be circling overhead.

A C130 transport plane, low and straining for altitude like a fat duck, came in from another direction and the tracers all turned on it as the startled pilot, probably coming in for a landing, banked and got away.

We found out later that several A-37s had bombed Tan Son Nhut airport, but whether the deed was done

by disgruntled South Vietnamese Air Force pilots or whether it was the first North Vietnamese air raid of the war is still not known.

An Air Vietnam 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 and the plane took off without them.

The North Vietnamese captured many A-37s and, shortly after the bombing, an expert in aviation matters pointed out to me what he said was a MIG-21, a Russian-designed fighter used by the North Vietnamese, wheeling in the sunset-lit sky. But I could not be sure.

It had been a day of MIG sightings. Reporters had said they had 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 be verified.

In Saigon on this day, with power passing to the Republic's third president in a

week, no one knew what to expect or what was happening or what was rumor and what was real.

The faces of the Saigonese, pressed into the gutters 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 panic for weeks now and the gunners trying to knock down their own planes seemed as if all control was gone.

A wire service immediately reported heavy street fighting as the North Vietnamese invaded the town and another source said there was carnage at the cathedral where the planes had strafed. Neither story was true.

Shortly afterwards 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 caliber pistol and shot at the driver, missing him. Mike Marriott, an Australian cameraman working for CBS, was filming the scene and later the officer pointed his pistol at Marriott's head. According to Marriott, the pistol somehow failed to fire and so the officer began to beat Marriott with the pistol. Marriott turned and fled.

It had been a day of disorientation. On the Newport Bridge, where the Bien Hoa highway crosses the Dong Nai River, you could lie on the crest of the bridge in the morning and watch the Viet Cong shooting at you from the far bank about a mile from the outskirts of the city.

The bridge had been crowded with traffic going back and forth but yesterday 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 Viet Cong, probably no more than 20 men, had moved in and taken the bridgehead on the other side of the river. Their instructions must have

in a Confused Capital

been to hold as long as possible and 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 a helicopter gunship circled

overhead looking for targets. When they found one they would dart down and fire off a salvo of rockets which would explode with a great flash and noise and the rising of brown dust and smoke.

But when it was over, from time to time, you could

see one of the Viet Cong, dressed in black, rise up from cover and dart to a new location. To show their defiance they would let loose of half a clip of automatic rifle rounds at the paratroopers, and you could hear the bullets hitting the bridge or passing harmlessly over-

head in the hot and humid air.

The day ended with South Vietnamese 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 and everybody is afraid.