

Era Ends For Press In Saigon

Washington Post Foreign Service

SAIGON, Nov. 20—after nine years of daily English-language military briefings for the foreign press, the government announced that today's was the last.

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For the tiny group of foreign correspondents who gathered in the government press building at the last briefing today to hear the announcement, the event had a certain nostalgia.

Several could recall the days at the height of the war when hundreds of correspondents would jam into the small, superheated briefing room and shout their enraged questions at military briefers standing on a platform before them bathed in the glare of television klieg lights.

Those briefings were dubbed the "five o'clock follies," and they usually featured an American lieutenant colonel dressed in fatigues who gave the news in a bland monotone and then managed not to elaborate.

The Vietnamese briefer, Lt. Col. Le Trung Hien, would give his news, too, sidestepping tricky questions with blank-faced professional imperviousness.

When the Americans left Vietnam there was no longer a U.S. side to the briefings, and attendance gradually dwindled as the foreign press corps shrank in the 22 months since the Paris cease-fire agreement.

About a score of full-time foreign correspondents are in Saigon now. At the height of the war, there were sometimes more than 500 correspondents in town, more than 100 of whom were based here.

The five o'clock follies, which were in fact held in various buildings and varying times over the years, became a primary source of material for many of these correspondents.

The briefings provided the grist for the daily summaries of fighting that most newspapers in America carried for years.

Today Col. Hien, who has been doing the same job each day for eight years, said: "We do this because we just don't want you to waste your time. Also, we often have nothing to say on our part."

Leaning on the podium as he always did, a huge South Vietnamese flag and a color photo of President Thieu behind him, Hien listened to a correspondent ask if a lack of questions or a lull in the war had brought an end to the briefing. His answer was not entirely clear, but nobody pressed him.

Col. Hien explained that a daily war summary in English will still be distributed and that he will be available in his office at the Psychological Warfare Department to answer questions.

He also said that the morning Vietnamese-language briefings, from which foreigners are barred, will continue.

Actually, he said, the English-language briefings are being cancelled "temporarily." Should the situation warrant, they might be resumed, he said.

A CBS television crew was on hand to film today's briefing, the first time in a long time.

The last dramatic briefing here of wide interest to Americans took place on Dec. 15 last year, when an American major appeared to tell how, American officer was killed and four others were wounded in an apparently well-planned Communist ambush of an unarmed American body recovery team.

Col. Hien received a small round of applause this afternoon after he said his final, "thank you."

S. Vietnam Retakes 'Iron Triangle' Base

SAIGON, Nov. 20 (AP)—South Vietnamese forces today recaptured the last of three outposts in the "Iron Triangle" 25 miles north of Saigon after a bloody six-month campaign, the military command announced.

The North Vietnamese and Vietcong overran the posts last May. The staging base for attacks on the capital.

Government forces suffered heavy casualties—some days as many as 100 men killed or wounded—in the campaign. The military command said North Vietnamese losses also were heavy.

President Nguyen Van Thieu ordered the outposts retaken by last June 19—Armed Forces Day—but the campaign dragged on.