

Anloc Seen From Above: War With Unreal Quality

By SYDNEY H. SCHANBERG

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, May 9 — C-130 transport planes flying at 8,000 feet dropped food and ammunition today to the besieged South Vietnamese troops in Anloc, 60 miles north of Saigon.

Several thousand feet under the transports, F-4 Phantom jets unloaded bombs on North Vietnamese positions. Cobra helicopter gunships and A-37 and A-7 bombers swarmed in with other bombs and rockets. Several observation planes circled, directing the attack.

Yet for all the planes and bursts and clouds of smoke, flying over the Vietnam war has an unreal quality.

Riding in the cockpit of an observation plane for nearly four hours above the battle for Anloc, which has been surrounded and under enemy siege for a month, which has been surrounded and under enemy siege for a month, there was little sense of the people on the ground.

Rapid-Fire Talk

Even the disembodied and rapid-fire conversations over the headphone from other planes and ground officers seemed unreal.

"A truck is moving there. It looks like a tanker. I'm going in with my 40 mike-mike. . . . Hit it, babe, hit it. . . . Negative ground fire at this time. . . . Did you hit a bridge at 891663 this morning? Yes, Sir, I did. Did you destroy it? I couldn't really tell, Sir. . . . Easter Bunny, you've got an F-4 coming up below you at 9 o'clock. . . . They've got incoming on the soccer field. . . . I've tried to kill that S.O.B. twice now. I want to make sure."

When that last message crackled over the headphone, the pilot of the observation plane, Maj. Robert L. Murphy, explained that the attacking Cobra helicopter pilot was talking about using Flechette rockets, which fire thousands of sharp, metal darts, on a concentration of North Vietnamese soldiers.

"They're excellent against troops in the open," the major said. "Nails 'em right to the ground."

Pilot on Third Tour

Major Murphy, a father of three from Saginaw, Mich., is a 31-year-old graduate of the Air Force Academy who is on his third tour in Vietnam. On his first two, he piloted B-52 bombers and three times flew raids over North Vietnam—a far cry from the missions he now flies in the two-engine Cessna that was built as a businessman's plane.

As he circled Anloc today, guiding soldiers to the supplies dropped by the C-130's and firing white phosphorous rockets from the pods under his wings to mark targets for the attack planes, he described the bloody days of the battle for Anloc a month ago.

Acres of Ash

According to American military officials, the North Vietnamese fired 20,000 artillery and mortar shells into the city, which is the capital of Binhlong Province. The northern third of the city is rubble. From the air, it looks like acres of gray ash—and much of the rest of it is not in much better shape. The 30,000 civilians who used to live in Anloc have either fled or been killed.

The South Vietnamese occupy the southern third of the city; the middle is contested and the northern section is North Vietnamese territory. The Communists do not keep a large number of troops there—perhaps because of the air strikes—but they do keep installing mortar and antiaircraft sites.

Major Murphy was marking some of those sites today, which were then blasted by the attack planes. Several fires from these strikes blazed in the ruins through the day.

The major resembled a perpetual motion machine. His left leg jogging in nervous energy, he chain-smoked

Camels as he flipped countless switches and carried on three radio conversations almost simultaneously — with ground observers, with attack planes and with other observation planes. Sometimes there was a fourth radio conversation—with the air support center north of Saigon, to ask for more attack planes.

"If it hadn't been for air support, Major Murphy said, "Anloc would have been Charlie's a month ago."

He pointed out the wreckage of enemy tanks and American helicopters and C-130s—all knocked out in the first fierce fighting—and said wryly: "It was just a little more exciting around here then."

No Enemy Spotted

Often, other people's conversation came through the headphones. An American adviser at Anloc was talking about morale of the South Vietnamese troops to a superior officer overhead in a helicopter. "There's been a little spark of encouragement in the last few days," he said. "Godammit, I hope it stays that way."

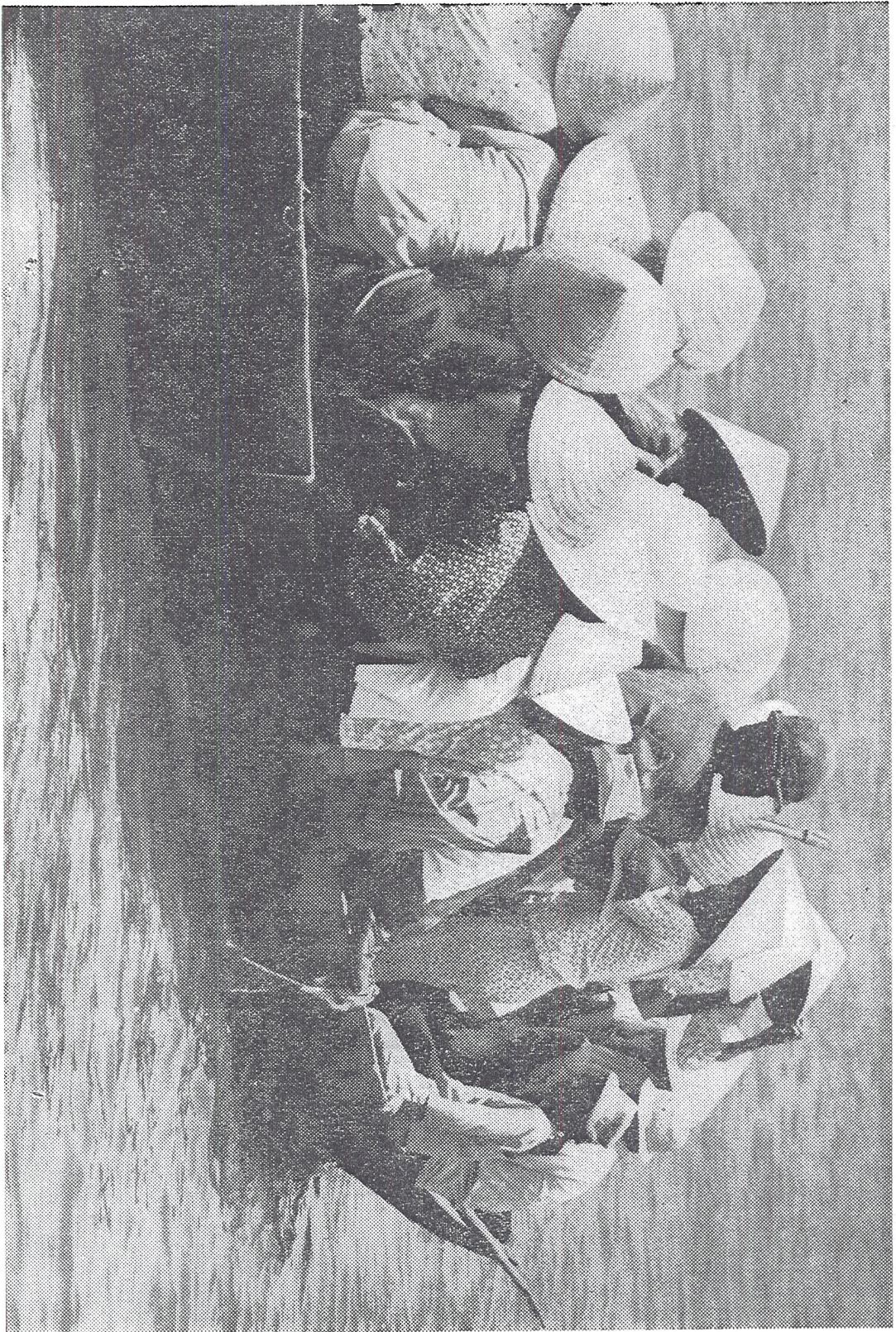
During the nearly four hours of flying with Major Murphy at about 100 miles an hour at an altitude of 3,500 feet, this correspondent could not spot any North Vietnamese soldiers in the open, unless the figures running for a parachuted supply bundle that went astray were enemy troops. The voice from the ground said, "They're our people," but Major Murphy said he thought some of them might have been North Vietnamese.

Attack planes were hammering both sides of Route 13 on the way back to Saigon. The 15-mile stretch of the road south of Anloc is still held by the Communists, and it has been impossible to resupply the city by road since the attack began.

The green carpet of rubber trees around Anloc and along both sides of the highway provides thick cover for the North Vietnamese, but in many places it has been broken by chemical defoliation and by the thousands of deep, water filled craters left by the 500-pound and 750-pound B-25 bombs.

Not until landing at Tan Son Nhut air base did Major Murphy tell his passengers that he had spotted bursts from the muzzles of antiaircraft guns. "That's when I took that evasive action, doing all those dips and sharp turns," he said.

"This job may appear dangerous," the major said, "but this little plane is hard to hit, and we don't get hit very often."



FLEEING FOR THEIR LIVES: Civilians leaving Hue cram boat for trip across Hong River, joined by a soldier aiding evacuation operation

The New York Times/Denis Cameron