

OCT 12 1972
Eyewitness

Story of The Blast

SFChronicle

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 Agence France-Presse

Hanoi

I was in the garden of the French mission at about 11:30 a.m. yesterday when the roar of the approaching jets was heard. As they flew over there seemed to be about 20 aircraft.

Then there was a great explosion and a huge cloud of ochre-colored smoke burst from the center of the mission complex whose buildings house the residence, chancellery library and cinema.

It was a direct hit. The residence was almost completely destroyed.

At the scene I saw top French diplomat Pierre Susini lying under what seemed tons of rubble and concrete beams. Only his head, bloodied from a wound, could be seen.

CONSCIOUS

But he retained consciousness. He spoke to people trying to free him asking after other mission employees who had been in the building at the time.

The 52-year-old French delegate general was finally freed after frantic efforts by mission staff and rescue

See Back Page

From Page 1

workers. Susini — who was posted to Hanoi nearly two years ago — was taken to Saint Paul's Hospital.

Doctors described his condition as "serious," but one added: "We are going to save him."

The residence was reduced to rubble. Walls left standing leaned drunkenly and water poured from shattered pipes.

CAR

In the mission's parking lot I found my car destroyed. The doors were ripped off and the roof smashed in.

There was damage elsewhere in the capital. It was the first time since 1966 that American bombers have struck in the center of Hanoi.

Part of the roof was ripped off the Algerian Embassy building. The School of Music, which is near the French mission, also was hit.

As rescue workers hunted through the mass of debris for the missing employees — a valet, carpenter and a switchboard operator — I overheard one comment:

"This raid this morning proves the efficiency of the famous laser bombs."

The French delegation in central Hanoi is a building complex, surrounding a mangrove park which includes the residence of the general delegate, the chancellery office building, the library and cinema building and three villas housing the delegation members.

The complex, near a small lake which is a favorite promenade for residents of the capital, is on one of the large avenues built at the beginning of the century by French colonizers to Europeanize the section facing the old Tonkinese city.

Near the three one-story villas, which since 1965 have housed only 12 to 15 staff members, there is a tennis court and clubhouse with a small bar and library which is open to other foreign residents in Hanoi.

In the mangrove park, half hidden by the trees and bamboo, is a Japanese-built concrete structure which is now a garage.

STATUS

The French general delegation in Hanoi is a diplomatic mission at the prime ministerial level, meaning

that Susini — like his predecessors — is accredited to the North Vietnamese premier rather than to the head of state. The delegation benefits, however, from full diplomatic privilege and immunity.

It was set up shortly after the 1954 Geneva agreement which ended the first Indochina war. North Vietnam opened a trade mission in Paris in 1961, and four years later established a reciprocal general delegation.

In the years after the Geneva agreement France was represented in South Vietnam by an embassy. Since the two governments broke off diplomatic relations in 1965, however, they have maintained representation at general consulate level.