

Arrival of Truce Teams Opens New Era in Saigon

New Era Begins

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SAIGON, Feb. 4—At the height of the war, Tan Son Nhut Air Base swarmed with trim, sure-footed American pilots, grizzled NCOs and a steady stream of weary GIs in floppy hats on their way to distant firebases.

It is a safe bet that few of them ever imagined that one day in a corner of Tan Son Nhut, past the Mexican snack bar, the basketball association and the movie theater, would be a growing colony of North Vietnamese and Vietcong officers, some of them, it is said, with jungle sores still on their feet.

In these early days of the Vietnam truce, as the fighting has gradually died down from its last-minute fury, a new era has unmistakably begun. What seemed inconceivable only a short time ago has become, if not commonplace, at least accepted.

And for all the well-founded skepticism about how long the cease-fire will last and whether it can ever be truly effective at all, the complex peace-keeping machinery has slowly begun to take shape.

Once or twice a day since last Tuesday, North Vietnamese senior officers dressed in green uniforms with gold braid on their shoulders and red stars on their caps, accompanied by their Vietcong comrades in

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simpler olive fatigues, have been driven in American cars (with the U.S. insignia painted over) to the nearby headquarters of the four-party Joint Military Commission.

There, in a refurbished aluminum-sided one-story office building, they sit around a square table with their American and South Vietnamese counterparts to discuss carrying out the provisions of the agreement reached in Paris, how to get supervisory teams into the field and assure the return of prisoners within the required timetable.

When refreshments were served one afternoon and senior diplomats from the International Commission for Control and Supervision (ICCS) were invited in to

get acquainted, the South Vietnamese were observed in polite conversation with their North Vietnamese foes—but not, it was learned, with the Vietcong.

Last Friday, the four heads of delegation met together for the first time and the three Vietnamese generals quickly came to an agreement: There would be no meeting Saturday because it was the start of Tet, the lunar new year celebration, and to work meant bad luck for the rest of the year.

Despite the pleasantries, the Communists have not been welcomed in Saigon—quite the opposite. The South Vietnamese have seen to that. The Vietcong-North Vietnamese compound is cramped, treeless and surrounded by rolls of new barbed wire. The only way in is past a surly South Vietnamese military policeman, and just a few of the 500 or 600 Communists so far arrived have been permitted to go outside.

The squat, cream-colored buildings that once housed a U.S. Army signal battalion have been cleaned up a little and fitted simply with beds, lockers and tables. But from a nearby vantage point, the compound displays all the amenities of a POW camp.

The North Vietnamese, at least, have complained of the treatment, according to American sources, saying that at a minimum they want to see Saigon. Yesterday, about a dozen of the highest Communists were driven to a villa in the compound of the old 1954 International Control Commission for a top-level meeting and picture-taking session of the new ICCs.

The cars were chauffeured by Vietnamese women in the traditional flowing sarongs. As the officers stepped out, some smiled and waved at gawking reporters. One even flashed the "V" sign that GIs here always used to signify peace. Another tossed out a package of cigarettes stamped "Made in Hanoi."

(There is a chance the of-

ficers may have been shepherded around once before. Early Wednesday morning, a fleet of American limousines with white flags on their hoods and led by a jeep full of armed MPs moved slowly through the streets of downtown Saigon. It was too dark to see who was inside, and the next morning nothing could be learned about the strange process.)

For the time being, the United States has agreed to assume the basic responsibility for assisting the Communist delegates.

When the Vietcong chief, the three-star general who commanded Communist forces in the 1968 TET offensive, arrived here from his jungle redoubt aboard an American helicopter on Thursday, he was solicitously met by an American greeter while another officer offered to carry his suitcase.

But the United States' role will be short-lived, because after the U.S. withdrawal is completed in 60 days, the four-party joint commission will devolve into a strictly South Vietnamese affair pitting the Saigon regime against the Provisional Revolutionary Government.

When the Americans leave, they will be taking the Mexican snack bar, movie theater, officers' club and the rest with them; so unless things loosen up very quickly, no one will have a chance to see a hardened guerrilla commander or a North Vietnamese colonel grappling with a taco.

The other half of the peace-keeping apparatus that began to emerge last week is the four-nation ICCS made up of officers and men from Poland, Hungary, Indonesia and Canada. To hear them tell it, they are only slightly better off than the Vietnamese.

"We're just as cut off from the outside as we could be," complained a

Canadian. "What's going on in the world?"

Within the limits of their orders, they have freedom of movement, but their accommodations in a large Tan Son Nhut compound only a few hundred feet from the main PX are spartan at best. Each country has been assigned four long barracks and everyone eats American-prepared food in a common dining room. (The PX has not been opened to them, incidentally, a slight which has been the source of considerable grumbling.)

Each of the barracks, which are grouped around four flagpoles, has already taken on a national style of its own. The Canadians are open and friendly and look a little like overgrown, overfed Boy Scouts in their summer uniforms of green baggy shorts.

The Poles across the way

are dour and a little suspicious, and when the men are clustered together in small groups there is the unmistakable odor of sausage, probably brought from home. Next to them are the easy-going Indonesians, relaxing in sarongs, moving at their own pace.

The Hungarians are burdened by the heavy wool of their uniforms, and the peaked caps they wear give them the look of another age.

Only the most senior officers are directly involved in setting up the ICCS teams that are to be sent to 44 places around the country, so the rest of the men (about half of the full contingent of 1160 has arrived) are spending their time with details like rounding up a water cooler.