

November 11, 1960

Saigon, Vietnam

The following account has been put together from a few notes and impressions of events which occurred November 11 - 13, 1960, in Saigon, Vietnam. To say that it has been the highlight of our tour up to this date would be an understatement. Nonetheless, it was most interesting, exciting, and sometimes a little tense. I am writing this one week later...after events are beginning to fall into their proper perspective. I have tried to be reasonably objective, and I hope not too dramatic, but after all, an attempted revolution unfolding before one's eyes cannot help but have its moments of drama. I have also tried to record our actions at an early date, for I'm sure, just like fishing stories, they will get better as the years go by. I hope this limited version will give you some idea of what we saw and did. I wish I had the opportunity to write the full story.

\* \* \*

On the night of November 10, 1960, Arnella, Rich and John went to a concert given by pianist Rudolph Serkin at the Alhambra theater. Georgia and I remained at home. I called for Arnella and Rich, John having gone to the home of Rusty Smith to spend the night, and we all retired that evening looking forward to a long Armistice weekend Friday, Saturday, Sunday.

At approximately 3:20 AM, November 11, we were awakened by what sounded like more than the familiar automobile backfires and popping of blowouts, something to which we are all accustomed because we live on the corner of a very busy intersection, Le Van Duyet and Hong Thap Tu. Within moments we were certain it was gunfire and I caught glimpses of tracers as I bounded out of bed and looked out the window. We all went out to the balcony which fronts on Le Van Duyet and then became certain that the shooting was in earnest. We could distinguish single rifle shots, machine gun bursts, an occasional heavier caliber piece, which we later learned came from tanks firing on the Palace, and many streams of tracers going over our house.

To get an idea of our location, visualize our house at the southwest corner of a rectangular piece of city property running approximately north and south. This rectangle is about three long blocks by two long blocks, the Palace grounds being about three blocks north of our home. Immediately south of the Palace grounds is the Cercle Sportif area and south of this is the Tao Dan park, a lovely botanical garden. The perimeter of the fighting area was Hong Thap Tu, Cong Ly, Taberd, and Le Van Duyet. So you see, we had a bit of a ringside seat for this affair.

After watching and listening to the firing for a few minutes, I saw a number of soldiers and military vehicles moving about at the intersection and the firing being directed toward the park and Palace. On the basis of this, I assumed that a military coup d'etat was under way and this was not a Viet Cong attack. It seemed to me a little improbable that the Viet Cong could mount a full scale attack on Saigon at this stage of the game, despite the fact that an offensive involving several hundred Communists had been reported up north in the Kontum area a few weeks ago. Having somewhat of an idea as to what was going on was reassuring in itself, for those who could only hear gunfire but not see any of the action were understandably concerned about the possibility of a Viet Cong attack.

Having decided that a military coup was in progress, I had mental pictures of troops forcing their way into the Palace, capturing the President, members of his family who reside with him, and others belonging to the official group. Also, I felt it would all be over by morning, with the military in control, a new government being established, and martial law announced. How wrong could I be! On this note we all went back to bed for a few hours of fitful sleep. The firing was alternately light and heavy during this time, every once in a while a big one going off, and we gradually became aware of sounds of fighting coming from different quarters of the city.

At daybreak we got dressed, with a sinking feeling that things were not over, and wondering what next was in store for us. I knew that the best place for Americans at a time like this was in the house, but John was across town and I had the responsibility of getting the family together, if possible. We decided that I would take a taxi, for the Mercedes is too closely identified with the government, and I didn't want to take any unnecessary chances. Finding a taxi was not a simple matter, even with the great numbers of them on the streets of Saigon. Eventually the policeman on the corner helped me out. Getting across town was not too difficult, except for finding streets which were not blocked by troops, threading our way through traffic jams, and avoiding the Palace area.

John had quite an experience himself. After the concert, he and his two friends fooled around, played cards, and generally stayed awake until about 2:30 AM. They were awakened by heavy gunfire near their apartment, for it is close to the headquarters of the Palace Brigade, a military group used to guard the President. Mr. Smith, John's host, kept the boys and the Smith children calm with a combination of his own wartime experiences and prayers. They spent all of the time lying on the floor under beds and generally sweating it out. On leaving the Smith's, I found my taxi had departed, so John and I walked several blocks until we caught another one. The driver was a little reluctant to head back across town in a direction which would take us toward the Palace area, but with a lot of zig-zagging we finally got him pointed in the right direction. At one intersection, not too far from the commissary, we got caught between opposing groups. Three truck loads of troops roared up to the intersection, bailed out and started firing immediately. We just got past the middle of the intersection as bullets started flying, narrowly missing a head-on collision in the process. The driver gave several sighs of relief, patted his heart fervently, and after two more blocks told us to get out when he learned where we wanted to go; he wanted to head in other directions. John and I walked home, keeping close to the buildings, ready to flop at any time. Realizing that this affair wasn't getting any shorter, I stopped at my favorite delicatessen to get a supply of cigars, but it was locked. I was reduced to cigarettes until Lloyd Musolf helped me out later in the day. John and I made it home just in time, for as we passed through our gate, heavy firing broke out, and we, and about 50 Vietnamese who poured in off the street, hit the dirt behind our wall.

It was good to have the entire family together. We talked things over, laid down a few ground rules for general conduct, said a prayer, and then got ready to watch and wait. Watching was a combination of fun and an incredible puzzlement trying to understand the actions of the Vietnamese. During the early hours of the fighting, the street in front of the house was quite deserted except for pousses, a few taxis and a number of trucks. When the firing became heavy, the pousses whizzed down the street at a speed the like of which we had not seen before, drivers casting quick glances over their

shoulders in the direction of the Palace. By daybreak traffic picked up and in a short time became chaotic. Because people did not know where troops were concentrated, they were forced to take devious routes wherever they were going, resulting in innumerable traffic jams, all aggravated whenever there was a burst of gunfire. Hundreds of pedestrians would inch forward toward a concentration of troops, then rush madly away when the shooting would start. People on bicycles and scooters would flop off and lie on the sidewalk against a building. Taxi drivers would stop and passengers and driver would dive under the cab. Pony cart drivers had a hard time managing the horses. One moment all was confusion, the next everyone would be up and on his way, school children going to school, businessmen going to work, servants going to market, and crowds of people just out to see what was happening. Incredible is the only word we newcomers to a revolution could use to describe the situation.

My policeman friend on our corner did what I think was an admirable job. He had been disarmed by the paratroopers at the start of the coup yet he stayed on the job directing traffic, trying to keep the crowds under control, and always being the last one to dodge bullets. I had him in the house for refreshments and smokes. He needed'em.

About 9:30 - 10:00 AM we started getting communications from other MSU people, mostly by note for there are very few telephones in the staff members' homes. We learned that everyone was safe, but that the Finkles had to move out of their house about 10:00 AM. They live very close to the Palace and a tank was parked in front of their home, firing toward the Palace. During one of the lulls in the shooting, the tank commander gave Jason the high sign, and he took off with his wife and baby. They had about the roughest time of any of the MSU people, besides Penny Emery who was caught at a friend's house on Cong Ly, also a hot spot. Generally speaking, the people living on Taberd were caught in some of the more violent action. Most of the casualties occurred on Cong Ly, Taberd, and Le Van Duyet.

This kind of activity kept up all morning. Troop assignments seemed to change in front of our house, sometimes there were large concentrations, other times relatively few. Around 11:00 AM sound trucks accompanied by tanks went by announcing to the people "stay off the streets, the revolution was a success, the military is in control". Many of the troops seemed quite jubilant, and judging by their actions, pleased with results. We did not see the crowd in front of the Palace, but have been told by those who did that the civilians appeared very happy about the whole thing. Arnella and the children spent a lot of time standing on chairs peering over the wall to watch the action.

While we were having lunch, our neighbor, Tom Bready, came over to report that troops were setting up a six inch mortar in the street (Hong Thap Tu) along side of the wall which surrounds our house. The troops told him they thought they might start shelling the Palace at 2:30 PM; it was now 1:30 PM, and maybe we had better move. We all went over to Tom's house, looked out from the balcony, and decided it would be a good idea to move. The troops were digging a hole in the street for the emplacement and stacking ammunition nearby. Mrs. Bready was in the States at the time, so Arnella helped the Bready children pack their bags, then we all hurried home to do the same. No one got panicky; however, there again was that sinking sensation of wondering what was coming next. We were concerned about a few things -- clothes to take care of us for several days, and what else to take along. We didn't have time

to pack much, so we settled for jewelry, money and passports. No one took anything foolish along, but being mindful of possible looting or occupation of the house, Rich asked if I would stop long enough to take a picture of a favorite painting which he had completed recently. This I cheerfully did. The servants decided to stay with the house, but we gave them money and told them to leave at any time if they wanted to.

This time we had to take the Mercedes, whether we wanted to or not. Our first stop was at Tommy Adkins' house, one of our police staff members. He lives a short distance down Le Van Duyet, and I felt his place might be a little too close if there would be any heavy mortar shelling. He agreed that it would be wise for him to move out also, so we didn't waste time talking, just told him to get going. They set up a machine gun in his driveway just as he and his family pulled out. From Adkins' we went to Musolf's to tell him what we were doing. Lloyd has a telephone and was more or less keeping in touch with some of the official American agencies. From there we drove out to Strecher's. His house is quite a ways from the Palace, relatively secluded, and about as safe a place as we could find. Adkins also had the same idea, for in a few minutes he pulled up with his family. We were also joined by one of our Vietnamese friends and his family, all of which brought the total up to 26 adults and children, quite a houseful to sit out a revolution.

Tommy, having been through a revolution or two during his South American experience, thoughtfully brought along a supply of scotch. We had to send out for beer a few times and were continually running out of soda and ice cubes; otherwise, we managed quite well. We again held a general conference and then prepared to sit things out. I made several trips to USOM headquarters to report on what was happening and to find out if there were any plans to set the evacuation program into action. Throughout all of the action the telephone service worked surprisingly well. The Embassy, USOM and MAAG were the chief information centers for Americans, with those having phones who were near the action continually reporting in to the various posts. Rumors were, of course, thick, exaggerated, inaccurate and alarming, but it was virtually impossible to listen to anything else.

By Friday afternoon the rebels had captured the local radio station and were on the air. Several of our Vietnamese friends did yeoman service by riding around town, checking on our houses, relaying messages and translating radio broadcasts. They enjoyed every minute of it. It was in this atmosphere that we settled down Friday evening. The children were fed in the first shift, adults second. After getting the kids spread out on beds and on the floor, Arnella and Georgia having moved down to a neighbor's house, we listened to the radio, played cards, and swapped stories. The most significant announcement of the evening was a short message by the rebel leader stating that the military was in charge, denouncing the Diem regime, and urging the people to appear at the Palace the next morning for a victory demonstration. This was followed by President Diem saying that he had agreed to the three points of capitulation laid down by the rebels and that he wished to avoid further bloodshed. This message was rebroadcast innumerable times. Diem sounded very tired, the rebel leaders very victorious. We all found places on the floor and sofas sometime after midnight, and went to sleep to the sound of occasional small arms gunfire.

At 6:30 AM Saturday we were awakened by heavy gunfire, and I do mean awakened. Four of us sleeping on the living room floor were up in a matter of seconds. This time it was not sporadic fire, but a concentrated burst of heavy pieces. We had heard rumors all day Friday that Diem had gotten in touch with loyal troops in Can Tho and My Tho, two large cities south of Saigon, and had ordered them up to help him out. Meanwhile, he was stalling for time while negotiating with the rebels. We have been told that much of the slaughter which occurred during the counter attack took place in the park across from our house. This was heightened by the fact that the loyal troops from the south mingled with the rebels, called for them to surrender, and when they didn't act immediately, shot them down. Also, many civilians were killed and wounded in front of the Palace. The action kept on most of the morning for such places as the Palace, Brigade headquarters, Surete, Police Headquarters, radio station, General Staff Headquarters, airport and a few other places had to be retaken.

By this time the little Strecher and Adkins children had devised a game called "Palace". Every time they heard gunfire, they would holler "Palace!" and dive under a bed or sofa. Safe as we were Richard heard a couple of stray bullets whistle over his head when he was out in the yard, and one time all of us were on the floor when there was some shooting nearby.

There was one bright spot during the morning when we learned that John Griffin a former MSUG staff member now back in Lansing called up -- yes, I repeat, called up. By this time the news of the coup had been reported in the States and John took a chance on getting through to us. Strangely enough his call came in directly to the MSU switchboard. Dale Rose and Don Aschom were there at the time and gave him a firsthand report, mostly that everybody was safe. Naturally, we all appreciated this contact, for no one had been able to get to PTT to send cables home. During one of my trips to USOM I stopped off at Bud Handville's to pick up a supply of food. The commissary had opened up for a few hours to help out those who might be running low on food, and we were. I forgot to mention earlier that a few hours after the revolution started, food prices, taxi fares and much merchandise doubled in price.

By Saturday afternoon the tide had turned. All opposition had been crushed, posts recaptured, and President Diem was back on the air, this time with his victory message. We all decided to spend another evening with the Strechers, for there were rumors that a pitched battle would develop between loyalists and rebels coming into Saigon from various outlying districts. (This never developed.) There was also the possibility of rioting or looting in the Palace area, and we figured another night away from home would do no harm. Admittedly, this second night away from home was a little more relaxed than the previous one. We felt reasonably sure that things were again under control. Sunday morning was bright, clear and quiet. After breakfast we drove home, to be met by the servants and to find everything in good order.

After getting unpacked and cleaned up we took a tour around town. The crowds were just as big as ever; however there was a hushed and sober atmosphere everywhere. I suspect this was due in part to the fact that the revolt had failed, doubt and uncertainty as to what the future held for many, and the presence of pools of blood on the sidewalks around the Palace walls, blood that had just barely time to dry. It was only by Sunday afternoon that thousands of passersby had ground the red clots into an unrecognizable mass. Injured and dead had been removed from the streets. Troops now occupied all strategic

positions. Tanks and armored vehicles took up posts inside and outside of the Palace grounds. The President appeared on the Palace steps and several thousand people marched by, after which the Palace compound was closed and placed under heavy guard.

By Sunday evening a strange sort of quiet had settled over the city. Shopkeepers had no difficulty establishing business as usual. However, it was quite apparent that the people of the city had divided opinions. Many were pleased and happy that President Diem was still in control, others unquestionably were discouraged, and a certain few were fearful. During the weeks that followed, several people dropped out of sight, others were arrested, and the fate of the revolutionary leaders who escaped to Phnom Penh is still not known as I write these closing lines. The tanks and armored cars were eventually withdrawn from the Palace grounds: however, troops are still encamped there with mortars and machine guns in place. The foreign diplomatic corps is patiently awaiting signs of political reform in the government, as are many Vietnamese. Our various projects are in different stages of activity. Some have been slowed down, others are being reactivated. However, there is no question that the revolt has had an effect on the total American program. The long-range impact is still very cloudy at this time.

I hope I have not presented an exaggerated account of the long weekend. Others in Saigon had more harrowing experiences than we did, and many Vietnamese knew tragedy. As a result, all of us have a little better understanding of the struggle against Communism and the meaning of Democracy.

Ralph Turner

This note is not for quotation or publication.