

MEMORIES FROM SAIGON

FEBRUARY, 1962 – AUGUST, 1964

Submitted by Robert G. West

Tom Mollick, LeRoy Vestal, and I were members of graduating class 1-62.

I remember the day at school when we got our assignments. After it became clear we weren't going to Lisbon, or Paris, or Stockholm, or Athens, or anywhere else equally sexy, I at least had to admit I'd never even heard of Saigon. Vietnam either, for that matter, though I was familiar with French Indo-China. We made a mad dash to the library and dug into whatever Time or Newsweek that was available. We looked at one another and the same thought crossed our mind simultaneously – "Shit, there's a shootin' war going on over there." Little did we know.

According to The Embassy Weekly Bulletin, Lance Corporals Mollick, Vestal, and West arrived on February 24, 1962. Our official *welcome* took place on February 27th, when two South Vietnamese pilots bombed Diem's palace. I remember taking our van to the Embassy for continued orientation, watching the planes out of the corner of my eye – not gawking, certainly - trying to be cool about the whole thing – wondering what on earth we'd gotten ourselves into. It wouldn't be the last time I wondered that.

In October of 1962, while President Kennedy and Premier Khrushchev played chicken during the Cuban Missile Crisis, we sat on pins and needles, wondering how those events would affect us. We were at least marginally aware that the North Vietnamese were pissed at Khrushchev for finally retreating. We couldn't help but feel that it at least possible they'd try something in the South. It was the first of many *tautness* ratchetings.

On January 2, 1963 three Americans died in a prophetic skirmish near a village called Ap Bac. Not all of us were aware at the time, but it was the single, most decisive ARVN defeat to date, and established the foundation for the coming coup de etat. Some of us had the dubious honor of escorting the caskets of the three American helicopter pilots. And it certainly wouldn't be the last time we did that.

For the MSG Ball, celebrating the 187th Anniversary of the Marine Corps I found myself with an unusual assignment. In a city where Madame Nhu had banned all sorts of *western influences*, which included dancing, I was to obtain a government permit to allow dancing. With the help of our cook and our driver I found the right government office. For the modest sum of 1,000 piasters I went back to the Marine House with a formal government permit allowing us to dance the night away. We also had to agree to hire, for another 1,000 piasters, two of Madame Nhu's nephews as security guards at the compound gate. I suspect that they ended up having the time of their lives.

Sometime between April and May of 1963 I was transferred to the Embassy in Manila to be the Chief Clerk for the RMO and Sergeant Major. In August of '63 Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr. was sent to Saigon to be our Ambassador. Shortly after his arrival the decision was made to beef up the MSG detachment, going from about 15 to 25. That put HQMC in a bind getting new MSGs graduated and shipped out. Meanwhile, the political and military situation in Saigon was spiraling into the toilet. Gunny Westrom asked for immediate help. Until new guards could be trained and shipped Wayne Maupin was transferred in from New Delhi, India. And since I was already familiar with the posts, the routines, and the people in Saigon, I volunteered to go back – TEMPORARILY of course – and help out. So, by the first of September I was back in Saigon, living out of a suitcase. Everything else I owned, including my dress blues, was safely tucked away in my apartment in Manila.

On October 6, 1963, several of us who were just heading into town were treated to a truly unforgettable sight. At one of the major intersections of downtown Saigon, for what turned out to be the sixth since June, a young Buddhist monk doused himself with gasoline and burned himself to death. That's an image that never leaves your memory bank, nor would it be the last time we got up-close and personal with some Buddhist monks. During the height of the persecution of the Buddhist majority by the Roman Catholic minority (read that as the Diem Regime) several monks sought and were granted political asylum in our Embassy. And we became baby-sitters. None of the bonzes spoke English, at least they chose not to when I was on post, which as I recall was on the second or third floor. We had a small table and a chair just outside their room and except for when their meals were brought in, it was as boring as USOM from 0200 to 0445.

November of 1963 proved most memorable. I went to work at the Embassy Annex with the morning shift. By 0900 reports started circulating that a coup by the South Vietnamese Generals was in the works. By 1000 hours the radios went silent and our news sources dried up. For the next 24 to 30 hours everyone but the Assistant NCOIC, a Sgt. Clenton L. Jones who was stranded at the Marine House, was on duty somewhere in the city. About 2200 hours I went up the street to see what the guys at the Embassy were up to but scurried back less than a half hour later when a column of Vietnamese tanks came rumblings down Ham Nghi Boulevard. It turned out they were looking for the Presidential Palace and got lost. When we finally got back to the House, I discovered that the room I shared with Corporal David Oman had taken a stray rocket, which blew the roof off and did extensive damage to our contents. This included setting free Oman's pet boa constrictor which he'd kept confined in a glass case on top of his dresser. As soon as I saw the snake was loose, I packed a



bag and moved into the Caravelle Hotel. Two days later the snake was found, curled up and sleeping peacefully in the bottom drawer of a dress two rooms down from mine. The maid was putting some clothes away, found the critter and promptly quit.

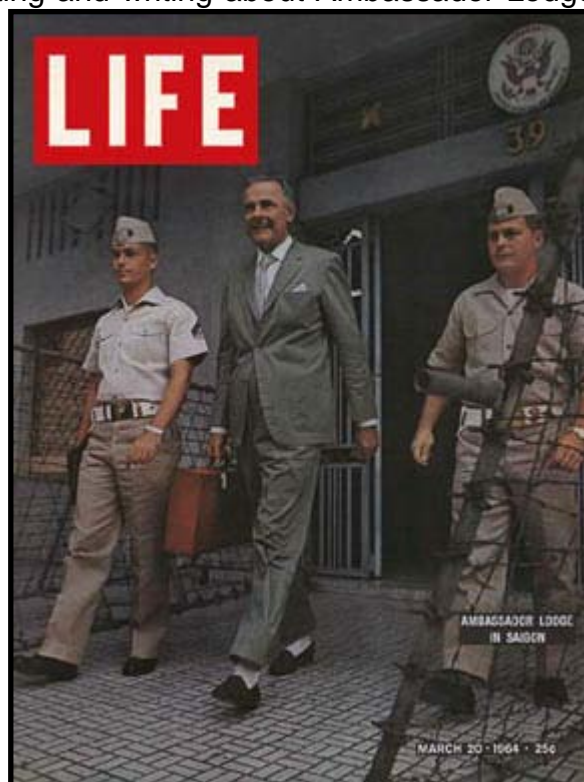
The damage to the Marine House from the rocket necessitated moving the 1963 Marine Corps Ball to a French sports club. And since my personal effects were in transit from Manila, I had to attend in a suit. It really was a bummer. But at least that year we didn't have to bribe anyone to be able to dance.

Sometime between the coup and the end of the year Dave Oman and I decided it would be a boon to our mental equilibrium to get the hell out of Dodge for the day. We rented a car (and its driver) and made a day-trip thru the heart of Indian Territory to South China Sea beach resort of Vung Tao. We swam, body-surfed, consumed French wine and bread. Then, thoroughly relaxed and at peace with the world, we made the same drive back to Saigon. Our

NCOIC, Gunny Westrom, and Dave McCabe the Embassy Security Officer, were considerably less than pleased by our less than reasoned actions. With usual youthful hubris, Dave and I figured “no harm, no foul.” Though we never considered doing it again.

Then came November 22nd. It was sometime between 0200 and 0300 when one of the Marines on duty came by the House and went room-by-room telling us all that President Kennedy had been shot. I remember thinking that it must be some kind of a really sick joke, only to find out at breakfast that he was in fact dead. Later in the month, or maybe into December, when they had the Condolence Book set up in the Counselor Office that I thought I was going to have to shoot someone. I had the Honor Guard at the book in the afternoon and a long, long line of Vietnamese flowed in to sign it. I got to noticing one particularly fidgety youngster who, for some reason, made me nervous. Just as he approached the Book he pulled a switchblade out of his pants pocket and let loose the blade. My hand went to my holster and my heart stopped. But the young man just sliced the palm of his hand and signed the Condolence Book in blood. My hands shook for the rest of my shift. I was most glad to see 1963 end.

In February, 1964 I celebrated my second anniversary. Larry Burrows was in town from Hong Kong, on assignment for Life Magazine, shooting and writing about Ambassador Lodge (he'd been Richard Nixon's running mate during the presidential election that saw them lose to Kennedy and Johnson), whom the Republican Party wanted to return home to derail the Goldwater candidacy. I remember when he was taking pictures of Lodge leaving the Embassy. It was the duty of Posts One and Two to escort the Ambassador to his car, braced on either side by barbed-wire barricades. Burrows hung around for about a week, continuing his assignment, so not much thought was given to any one part. He told me that he ended up shooting over 20 rolls of 35mm film. A couple of days past March 20th I was on duty again, Post One again, and someone from the Marine House



came running into the lobby, tossed the March 20th issue of Life in front of me. I'm still in awe of that cover and of the photograph, even if it did piss off the Commandant. Years later I was really saddened to hear that Larry Burrows had died in 1971, chasing another story of the war into Laos.

In August my relief finally arrived. Tom Mollick and LeRoy Vestal had already gone home. So had Wayne Maupin, my Life Magazine partner. Now it was my turn. While driving through the interior of Oregon, headed for leave in Moses Lake, I heard the radio reports of the destroyers being fired upon in the Gulf of Tonkin. I was just positive that when I arrived in Moses Lake I'd have orders sending me back to Saigon. But there weren't any and despite the efforts of the re-enlistment officers at El Toro I got my discharge and by the middle of September was happily enrolled in college.

Looking back from a distance of over 45 years I am torn by a terrible dichotomy. I thoroughly enjoyed my tour in Saigon (and Manila). I left there believing in our mission and our commitment to that country. I grew to deplore what came later, and our governments seemingly unwillingness to do what was necessary to win out. Everything short of that end result, was, as far as I'm concerned, a betrayal to those who gave their last full measure.