

The 'Ordinary Life' of Americans In Saigon

By PETER GROSE

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IN THE FIELD—Marines unload a helicopter bearing supplies for a Vietnamese Army unit fighting guerrillas.

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SAIGON.

LAST November, when all the world's newspapers were full of the coup in South Vietnam, the deaths of President Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu, the second-graders in Room 7 of the American Community School of Saigon decided to put out their own newspaper.

The lead article was bylined "Gene." It is reprinted here by permission:

"In the war Friday there were 25 tanks. There were 3 bombs that dropped. The Nhuses killed themselves. There were 4 planes that came up over the Saigon River."

Subsequent disclosures may have altered that version of the coup somewhat, but a color sidebar which still stands up added detail in the first person. Room 7 correspondent "David M." wrote: "I saw the Palace. It was over blown with bombs and shooting."

The single page of handwritten copy looks no different from newspapers produced by second-graders all over the United States, except that American youngsters here have something other than "My Vacation" and "My Dog Rex" to write about from their own experience.

Nor does Room 7 at the American Community School, with its alphabet

charts and arithmetic flashcards, differ much from the schoolrooms the second-graders would have known at home. When the children peer into their desks first thing each morning they look to the uninitiated observer just like any 7-year-olds squirming before the unwelcome task of sitting still for a few hours. But in Saigon, this particular squirming is not for nothing. The principal has ordered all pupils to look carefully inside their desks before reaching in—someone, a Communist Vietcong terrorist, might have placed a trip-fuse grenade inside during the night.

Two weeks ago when tanks again rumbled through Saigon's streets in an attempted coup, the schoolchildren could have had a splendidly terrifying view—the school is directly across the street from military headquarters and the airport entrance, the focal points of the threatened action. Fortunately for the children's parents, the coup was timed for a Sunday. "Anyway," said one parent casually, "when these things happen they call a school holiday."

To the young Americans of Saigon the fearful has become fun; to their teachers, to their parents and their parent's friends, the extraordinary is only normal. The American community of Saigon has built an ordinary life out of events taking place in headlines and history.

An estimated 10,000 Americans live

in this capital at war. Far from being a community of expatriates such as exists in more carefree foreign capitals, most of these Americans are here in the service of their country's boldest foreign policy commitment since the Korean war. Without giving it much thought, they are the embodiment of America's determination to defend Southeast Asia from Communist expansionism.

Many are here because they are specialists in the varied and technical fields that go into a modern counter-insurgency effort: hydraulic engineers and geologists to help the people of the Mekong Delta find drinking water, agricultural experts to show them how to raise a better breed of pig, police instructors to help organize a national police force.

THERE are American military researchers studying the engagements of the war for future knowledge of helicopter warfare, of air and ground mobility and firepower. A large statistical section gathers and analyzes statistics of battles and operations, for this is a war small enough compared with, for instance, the Korean war to make statistical study practical, yet important enough to provide valuable lessons for future military theorists.

Supporting those American officers and enlisted men out in the field who

advise units of the Vietnamese Army is a full-fledged military headquarters in Saigon with separate commands of Army, Air Force, Navy and Marines. There are at present twelve generals on active duty in Saigon forming a joint staff of the Military Assistance Command or heading secondary commands. With assistant chiefs of staff for personnel, intelligence operation, logistics, plans and communications, there has been set up in Saigon what amounts to a little Pentagon.

This headquarters commands American troops, not Vietnamese. Its mission is to support and advise the Vietnamese military establishments, not to direct the war effort itself.

It is with impatience and frustration that American officers in Saigon as well as in the field hear statements from public figures at home calling the advisory role hypocrisy, implying that Americans here do in fact give the orders for this war. How much easier it would be for the advisers—if not the politicians—if they could command and be obeyed.

"I know what it's like to command troops," says one American officer, "and it isn't like that here. I've got a whole battalion of Vietnamese soldiers around me and the only man I can command is my own sergeant."

Physically there are two American communities (Continued on Page 137)

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IN THE CITY—For the 10,000 Americans in Saigon—servicemen, diplomats and civilian experts, wives and children—the symbols of war are ever-present, and often its cruel realities, as well. Yet they live largely peacetime lives. These pictures show some aspects of their daily routine. *Top right*—an American soldier on the roof stands guard over children leaving the American Community School. *Clockwise*—American and Vietnamese twisters; one of the Navy commissaries where U.S. housewives shop; a serviceman making friends; and American children in a Vietnamese language class.

Americans in Saigon

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here: those who live at Tansonnhut airport, outside the city, as on a forward military post, and those who live in town, with the regular hours of their military or civilian jobs leaving them opportunities for the community life they would enjoy back home. Husbands come home from the office, friends drop in for dinner or a drink or bridge. Couples go bowling, or to the movies, or to the weekly bingo at the officers' mess.

Both Lieut. Gen. William C. Westmoreland, chief of the Military Assistance Command, and Ambassador Maxwell D. Taylor have warned Americans here against letting the comfortable community life of Saigon interfere with their work. For Westmoreland, this means requiring all military personnel to work at least a 60-hour week (the work day at headquarters starts at 7:30 A.M.). At Tansonnhut, the hours may be longer and more irregular, with few opportunities to get into town.

Perhaps 6,500 of Saigon's American community are military personnel without dependents, on one-year tours of duty. About half of the enlisted men and one-fifth of the officers live in cantonments — tents or barracks at Tansonnhut. The rest — largely those involved in the various headquarters—live in about 20 converted hotels and apartment buildings downtown or in Saigon's Chinese quarter, Cholon, a thriving city in itself.

SOME high-ranking officers and enlisted men in certain jobs are entitled to bring their families to Vietnam, but must then stay for a double tour of two years. For the military families there are more than 100 apartments and villas scattered around town in the better French residential neighborhoods.

These are also the neighborhoods where the American civilians live—Foreign Service officers of the United States

Embassy, the vast mission of the Agency for International Development, the United States Information Service and a dozen other Government and private agencies doing research and special projects.

A hard core of old-time residents in private business keeps the community from being strictly a Government company town. Families like the Tom Breadys (he is Pan American Airways manager) or the Lincoln Brownells (he manages an engineering firm and Mrs. Brownell is the elementary principal at the community school) have lived here for years.

THE community activities of a small American town have sprung up in the midst of the capital of South Vietnam. Drama groups, charity circles and hobby clubs are announced weekly in the embassy bulletin. The American Women's Association of Saigon has put out an international cookbook to raise money for charity. Wives and off-duty servicemen teach English at the Vietnamese-American Association. There are no fewer than 13 organized church congregations.

The community school has existed since 1954 but only began to approach its present size—more than 650 students—in 1962 when the massive build-up of American military strength got under way. Housed in modern permanent buildings, the school is a private institution receiving some United States and Vietnamese Government assistance but mainly supported by tuition payments. A few teachers have come to Vietnam specially to teach at the school; most are drawn from the wives of Americans assigned here.

Saigon's American teen-agers form a community of their own, evidenced by the weekly "Teen Scene" column in The Saigon Post, one of two English-language newspapers edited by Vietnamese mainly

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—OFF-DUTY—Two American servicemen bargain with a Saigon street vendor. Troops' relations with the public are good.

(Continued from Preceding Page), for the American community. Some of them — including Sue Youngdale, daughter of Brig. Gen. Carl A. Youngdale, assistant chief of staff for intelligence — got together this summer to run a day camp — with relay races, dodge ball, baseball and tennis — for the younger children.

FORMER Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge used to call himself the Mayor of this American community. Under the Armed Forces joint command in Vietnam, the United States Navy has the role of city manager.

The 500-man Headquarters Support Command manages the community facilities, the bus lines, motor pool, military police and dispensary. A Navy real-estate office leases and maintains housing. Since there is no specific American quarter of Saigon, the Navy is constantly on the lookout for villas coming available with air conditioning and glass windows — comforts that even well-to-do Vietnamese would not necessarily require.

The eight messes for the officers' and enlisted men's billets make up one of the largest messing operations in the United States Navy. The Navy Exchanges and Commissaries give American housewives reasonable facsimiles of supermarkets for their weekly shopping. They do a gross business of \$13 million annually.

The stately, tree-lined Rue Catinat, where Frenchmen used to sip *apéritifs* in the late afternoon, is now lined with American-style bars and coffee houses blaring out the latest juke-box hits. Old Vietnamese clothing merchants named Luong Huynh and Cat Tinh have now been joined in the Catinat by the Oxford Ladies and Gents Tailors and even the Texas Tailor. In their windows are the traditional Vietnamese dress, the classic *ao dai*, but alongside are black leather motorcycle jackets with "Saigon Tigers" embroidered on the back.

PEDICAB drivers in floppy hats and worn cotton shorts loll in the sun listening on Japanese transistor radios to American disk jockeys on the Armed Forces Radio Service. English gradually takes over from French as the second language of Vietnamese store clerks and office workers. Furious is the Frenchmen left over from the old colonial days who jumps into a taxi only to have the driver turn and ask: "Where you go?"

Perhaps the best commentary to be made about the American community here is that it does not exist in isolation from the Vietnamese city around it. Friction, legal or social, between the local citizens and the flood of new ar-

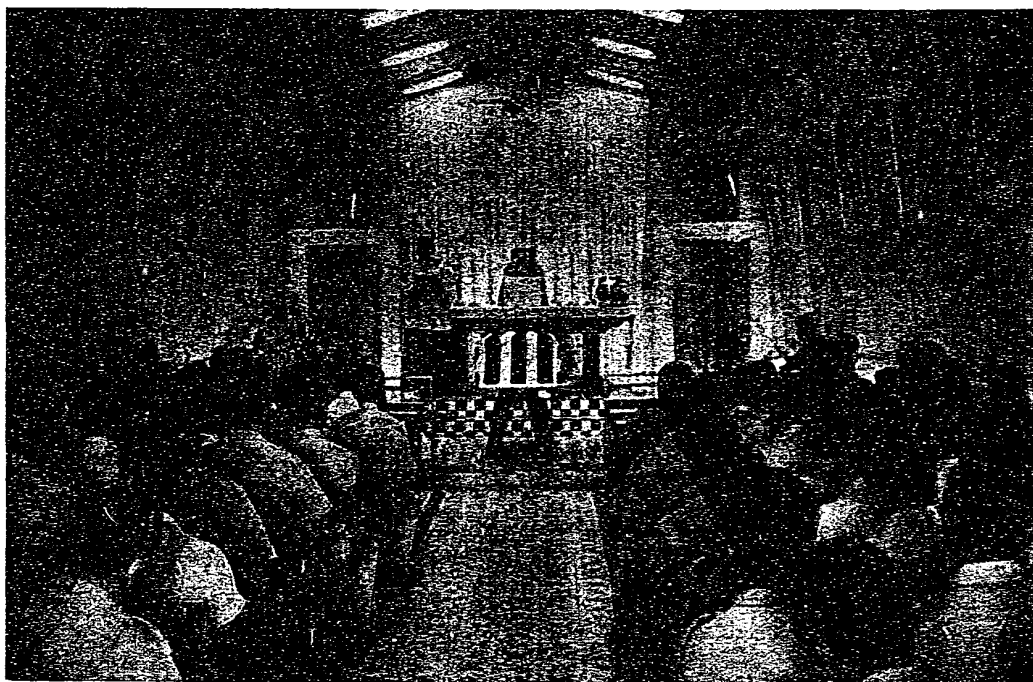
rivals from across the Pacific has been hearteningly small. Few American families do not have a number of Vietnamese friends; Vietnamese guests are the rule at cocktail and dinner parties. In Saigon one sees the meeting of two naturally hospitable peoples.

For a practical reason, however, the Vietnamese have undoubtedly taken the larger step toward building natural social relationships: It is they who have learned to speak the language of the other. The few Americans who try to learn Vietnamese are quickly frightened by the subtle tonal inflections which make all the difference of meaning. The

capital at war? Special attention centers on the presence of dependents, small in number (about 1,600) but vast in psychological importance. They are free to return home at Government expense at any time, but fewer than 150 have elected to leave. Those who remain do so with feelings varying from reluctance — "I wouldn't want to leave my husband" — to outright enthusiasm — "Why leave? I like it here." New arrivals for two-year tours continue to bring their families, and registration at the American school is up this fall. One newly arrived parent said: "When I saw the pictures in the papers back

tasks on taking command was to try repairing the information gap. He instituted a daily news sheet for distribution to all posts and authorized the radio station to broadcast officially cleared local news. In this month's coup attempt, for instance, American listeners received general information about the events around them from the start, even including a translation of the coup leaders' demands as broadcast earlier by the Vietnamese radio.

Although Saigon's Americans still seem short on their detailed knowledge of the situation in Vietnam, few of them doubt the value of their



IN MEMORIAM—"All too often something happens to jolt Americans in Saigon out of their comfortable routine." Above, services at Tansonnhut air base for a paratrooper killed in action.

cheer "*Vietnam, Muon Nam!*" sounded by Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara during one of his visits should mean "Long Live Vietnam!" With a difference in tone and pitch almost imperceptible to foreigners it becomes "Vietnam wants to lie down." Only one American diplomat, a junior Foreign Service officer in his first overseas post, has been awarded the grade of "fluent" in reading and speaking Vietnamese by the Foreign Service Institute in Washington.

With large numbers of servicemen away from home in a cosmopolitan foreign city, Saigon has the problems of discipline encountered in any overseas military post. But the number and severity of incidents between American soldiers and the local population is low. The troops have been made fully aware of the delicate position Americans are in here—and capacity for self-discipline is one of the factors weighed heavily in the selection of personnel for duty in Vietnam.

Periodically, a question comes up for review here and in Washington: Is it advisable to maintain this large a community of Americans in a

home of the guards around the school, I decided that was about as safe a place for my children as there could be."

What do they think about the war in Vietnam, the Americans of Saigon? Strangely enough, except for the relatively few in positions of broad responsibility, they seem to know little about the big picture around them. Reading the same war news as their families and friends back home—clippings from stateside papers are among the most welcome mail in Saigon — Americans here often have something of the same sense of remoteness and puzzlement about what is going on in all except the specific spheres of activity that are their own.

NEWs broadcasts on the Armed Forces Radio Service go into great detail on stateside developments—including baseball scores—but are under tight American-imposed restrictions about reporting events inside Vietnam, for fear of upsetting the Vietnamese Government with what seems to be an official American voice.

One of Westmoreland's first

being here. There are many who think the war should be stepped up, that Americans should take a more active role in combat and command. The abstract frustrations of an advisory role are the frustrations of daily life for people here. Few, however, think the United States should pull out of Vietnam.

"Of course what we're doing here is worthwhile — it's the most important thing I've done in my life, and I'm grateful to be a part of it," said a young enlisted man over a drink in his mess. His sentiment is encountered at American gatherings across the country, whenever someone starts thinking seriously about it.

And all too frequently something happens to jolt a few of these Americans out of their comfortable routine. The name of a friend figures in a news story. An honor guard forms at Tansonnhut airport; a chaplain reads from the Bible; a general snaps to a salute. A flag-draped coffin is carried onto a waiting plane, and an American leaves on his last trip home. The American community of Saigon has lost another one of its own.