

G.I. JOY: FINDING CHRISTMAS IN A COMBAT ZONE

VIETNAM



BOB HOPE'S SHOW
Raquel, gags and a million memories

TET

How the VC
blew a hole in
our embassy
and our will



Why Jan
Scruggs
loves
Maya Lin's
Wall

The '69
Lottery:
What was
your
number?

'Is one of
our guys
snoring?'
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MORNING CHAOS At dawn on Jan. 31, 1968, an MP takes cover as security forces clash with Viet Cong guerrillas across the street in the U.S. Embassy compound.



Tet's Big Bang

How an insane—and unsuccessful—Viet Cong assault on the U.S. Embassy blew a hole in America's will

BY WILBURN MEADOR

As midnight drew near on January 30, 1968, the Marine Security Guard at the United States Embassy in Saigon began its routine shift change. Marine Corporal Tom DeWitt and I had just posted Sergeant Ron Harper and Corporal George Zaccarinni inside the chancery of the embassy. We were now heading out for our posting at the old embassy building, which was still being used for diplomatic offices, several blocks away alongside the Saigon River. I was a corporal and had been stationed with the Marine Security Guard (MSG) in Saigon for a little more than a year. Although I didn't realize it at that moment, as our vehicle pulled away from the embassy, DeWitt and I were surely the last Americans out of the compound that night before all hell broke loose, culminating in one of the most pivotal events of the entire Vietnam War.

With DeWitt in the passenger seat and me riding on the tailgate of our International Scout, our driver took a right out of the compound's side vehicle entry onto Thong Nhut Street. As we pulled out onto the street, something caught my attention. I noticed that the small wooden Vietnamese National Police kiosk situated on the sidewalk near the gate was totally vacant. Typically, in addition to the two men normally assigned to the post, there would also be several other police officers milling about. The kiosk was only a block away from the local police precinct station, and at shift change, police officers would usually stop by and shoot the breeze with the policemen—whom we called White Mice because of their white uniform shirts—on duty. But on this night, with not one of the White Mice in sight, my antennae shot up as we drove along the dark and quiet streets toward our post at the old embassy.

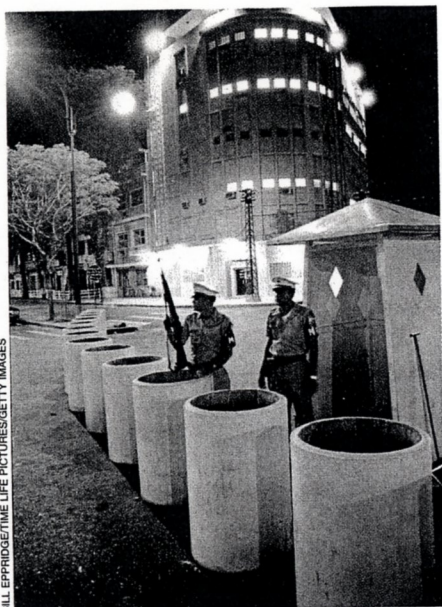
As soon as DeWitt and I got to our post, I immediately telephoned Sergeant Harper, whom we had just left back at the embassy, to give him the heads up that the Saigon police guard at the side gate was missing and that something strange was going on.

"Hey, Harp, you got nobody covering your backside." I said. "There's nobody there." I made clear to Harper that I was certain of this fact. I knew then that this was a harbinger of bad things to come. Several hours later, it became apparent to me that many of the local police knew an assault was imminent at the embassy that early morning.

The 100-man Saigon Marine Security Guard unit had grown to be the largest of its kind in the world. Only the Paris MSG unit came close in size, and it was only half our strength. In the year I had been in Saigon, there were a number of tense moments in the political and military life of South Vietnam. The Marine Security Guard had grown accustomed to dealing with them. Indeed, only 2 ½ months before Tet, we served double rotations on posts when the political battles between Nguyen Van Thieu and Nguyen Cao Ky grew hot and street violence appeared imminent. We took it all in stride. Marines there knew their weapons, their duties and responsibilities, the "lay of the land" and each other.

We were a "tight" unit that had been together for a good while, with excellent leadership from Leo Crampsey and Bob Fury of the State Department and Marine Captain Robert J. O'Brien, Gunnery Sgt. Allen Morrison and Staff Sgts. Leroy Banks and Darrell Partain. Most of the rest of the Marines in the unit were noncommissioned officers, corporals and sergeants and a few lance corporals. All things considered, we were as prepared for action as any Marine Security Guard unit in the world. We had good men, but unfortunately, at the time, we had few arms. We were limited to .38-caliber revolvers, some 9mm Beretta submachine guns and 12-gauge shotguns.

In the days and weeks just ahead of the attack, it was clear that "something was up." The fight between the North Vietnamese Army and the reinforced 26th Marines at Khe Sanh was raging, and its reverberations were felt across the country. In Saigon, we knew this was a big deal, that something



OLD TARGET Americans guard the old U.S. Embassy in Saigon after a terrorist bombing there in 1964.

very big was happening in I Corps, and only one Marine regiment was at Khe Sanh to contend with the threat. Sensing something more was afoot, U.S. Army Lt. Gen. Frederick C. Weyand, commanding general of U.S. II Field Force, consulted with General William C. Westmoreland and got his permission to move his maneuver battalions closer to Saigon to provide greater security to the capital city in the week leading up to Tet. Likewise, our State Department and Marine leadership took precautions, double-manning our posts. All of those responsible for security in the city—the Marine Security Guards and members of the 716th Military Police Battalion—were cognizant of tensions in the air but went about their duties as usual. We all had the feeling in those last days of January that soldiering intuitions were coming to the fore.

But January 30 had dawned as lovely as usual in Saigon. The city was bustling as families prepared for their New Year's celebrations. Roads into Saigon were clogged with holiday travelers heading home to spend Tet with loved ones.

The new \$2.6 million, six-story U.S. Embassy, opened just four months earlier in September 1967, represented America's power and its clear intent to remain a vital force in Vietnam for years to come. An 8-foot-tall wall surrounded the 4-acre compound, and high atop the embassy building was a helipad that provided our security guards an excellent vantage point. We could see for miles across the city, as well as down onto Thong Nhut Boulevard itself, the major thoroughfare leading to the Presidential Palace, roughly three-quarters of a mile away.

On the night of January 30, Marine Sergeant Rudy Soto was posted on the roof, armed with a .38 revolver and five rounds, a 12-

'The embassy's tall outer wall gave perfect cover for anyone trying to hide alongside it, even from the roof'

gauge shotgun and a radio. While he had a commanding view from his rooftop perch, the modern structure had a design flaw as far as maintaining security was concerned. The tall outer wall encircling the compound, while providing protection, also provided perfect cover for anyone attempting to hide along it, even from the rooftop position. The enemy could approach unseen by merely hugging the wall and moving to the desired point of attack. And that is what the Viet Cong were preparing to do.

Soon after midnight, what Sergeant Soto *could* see clearly from the roof were green tracer rounds that were coming uncomfortably close to him as he stood watch. Tracer rounds flying around the Saigon night during Tet were not uncommon, as reveling residents welcomed the New Year. But orange tracer rounds were ours; green tracer rounds belonged to the Communists. Soto was seeing more green tracer rounds and was growing a bit concerned.

Our security posts on the night of January 30 were spread around Saigon at the new and old U.S. embassies, all four U.S. Agency for International Development posts, the Joint Public Affairs Office, the ambassador's and deputy ambassador's quarters, the residence



UNHAPPY NEW YEAR Under Saigon's night sky, helicopters fly above the illuminated six-story U.S. Embassy after attacks on the chancery and across the city have begun in the early morning hours of Jan. 31, 1968. While the action at the embassy would be over in hours, fighting raged in the city for days.

of Ambassador Robert Komer, and the Marine House, our living quarters. Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker also had a personal security unit. That night, just as the attack was launched, approximately two-thirds of our total strength was on duty. As was our standard procedure, each post reported its status to the embassy on the hour. When I phoned in the status of our post at 2 a.m., Sergeant Harper reported to me that the fight was on at the embassy.

All of our Marines who were not on duty were on standby and ready to move at a moment's notice should relief of any posts become necessary. Captain O'Brien was with his men when the call came from the embassy requesting relief from the attack. His response was swift and sure, and all available Marines were mustered and piled into vehicles headed to the fight at the embassy. One group, led by O'Brien, approached the embassy from Mach Dinh Chi Street, and Staff Sgt. Leroy Banks led a second relief column, which was approaching from the direction of the Presidential Palace.

By this time, guerrilla and sniper activity was breaking out across the city, and the relief forces had to use fire and employ maneuver tactics to get into the action. At least in one instance, American forces were being interfered with by some elements of the local police force. The streets, eerily empty and tranquil just a couple of hours earlier, were now descending into chaos.

Orders had gone out for all other posts to stay where they were. DeWitt and I remained at the old embassy throughout the night.

Like all other MSGs on posts across Saigon at that moment, DeWitt and I were isolated. We were all "easy pickings" for the Viet Cong during those early hours of the assault. As the extent of

Marine Security Guards—A Breed Apart

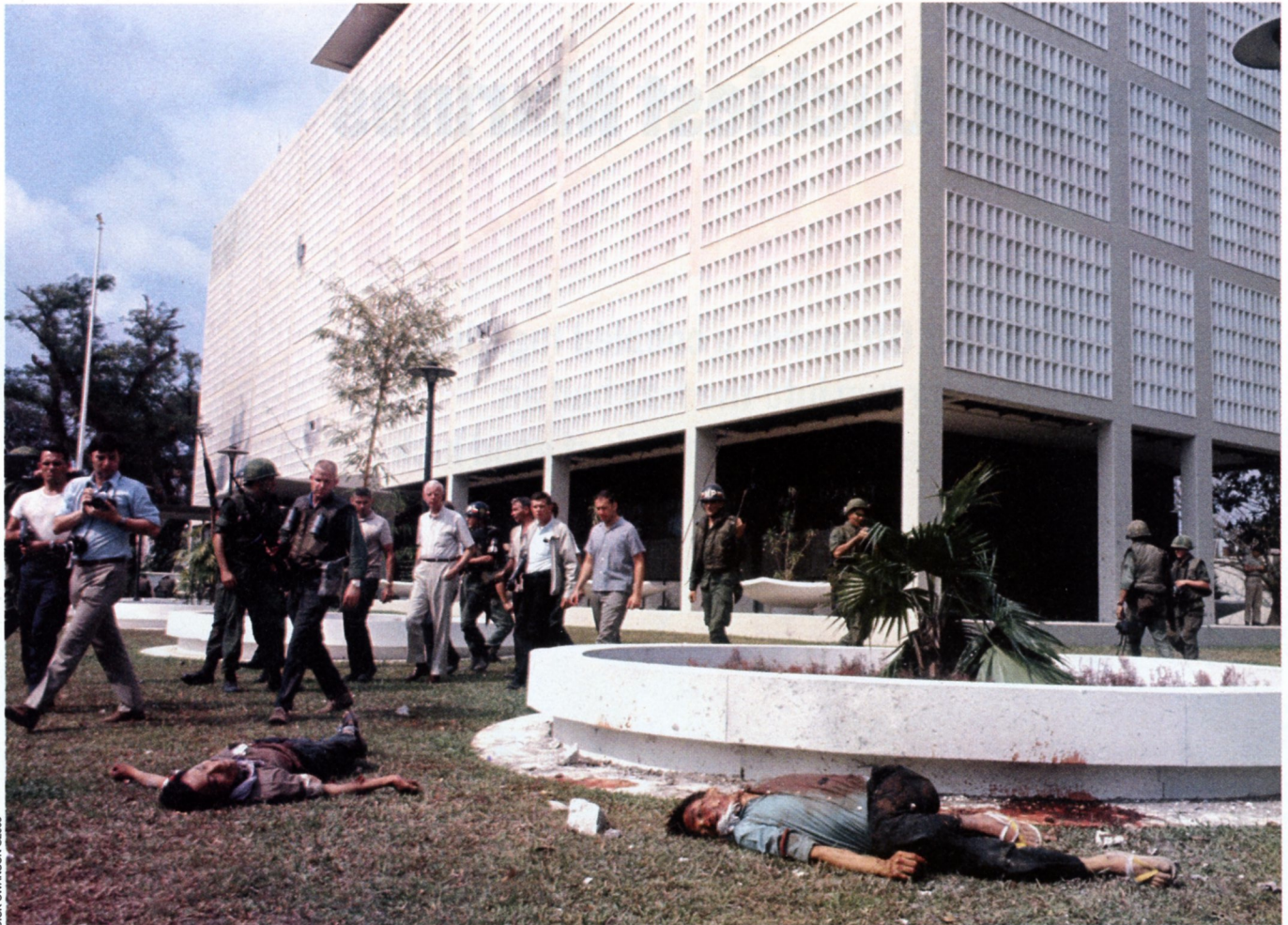
ALL OF THE MARINE'S best qualities were to be found in abundance in the Marine Security Detachment, Saigon, on January 31, 1968. The Marine Sergeant Guard (MSG) program was established in 1948, with an agreement between the U.S. Department of State and the U.S. Marine Corps. Wasting no time in deploying, one of the MSG's first two missions went to Southeast Asia, and by 1955 there were 30 Marines in the Saigon detachment. In a country plagued by war for many years, the American diplomatic community had become a clear and present target. In 1964, after bombs were set off outside the old U.S. Embassy near the Saigon River, life for the MSG's of Saigon would never be the same again.

The guard who defended the U.S. Embassy in Saigon was not a typical Marine. First, he had been screened at his parent command to ensure that only the finest quality of individual was sent forward for specific training and evaluation at Henderson Hall (now Quantico) in Northern Virginia. It was very easy to be dismissed from MSG School and many good Marines were. Marines who were squared away in mind, body, spirit, with independent characters, who could think and act for themselves without immediate supervision were the ones who moved on to serve abroad in diplomatic installations. These were the types of Marines who defended the U.S. Embassy at the beginning of Tet in 1968.



DONALD JELLEMA COLLECTION/ THE VIETNAM ARCHIVE/ TEXAS TECH UNIVERSITY

AFTER ACTION Just minutes after the fighting ends, military and civilian personnel regroup in front of the embassy's massive teak entry doors that withstood an enemy rocket-propelled grenade. Four members of the 716th Military Police Battalion and one Marine Security Guard were killed in the action.



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SUICIDE STRIKERS U.S. Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker (center, in white) is surrounded by security and accompanied by photographers and news reporters as he emerges from inside the pock-marked chancery to tour the embassy grounds, where the dead Viet Cong who launched the suicide assault remain.

Great Britain's WWII prime minister, Winston Churchill, spoke eloquently to his battered and beleaguered people after the Battle of Britain with the words, "Never before in the course of human history has so much been owed by so many to so few." He was, of course, addressing the recent conclusion of the German attempt to bring the British Empire to its knees by aerial bombardment. It did not work. The British beat back that attack.

Fast forward some 28 years later in Vietnam when, in those early morning hours of January 31, 1968, a 20-man Viet Cong assault force executed a wildly audacious attack on the new U.S. Embassy compound, a veritable fortress in the center of Saigon. What amounted to a suicide strike has gone down in military history as perhaps one of the most significant—and successful—"economy of force" operations ever conducted. Never mind the fact that 19 of the 20 guerrillas who entered the compound were killed and that they failed in their primary mission to break into and seize the chancery building with the intent—apparently—to hold it to their deaths.

At the embassy compound battle, it was the personal and professional quality of men in the fight, their training, character, teamwork and dedication to duty that made the difference in victory and defeat. But, alas, the success of the embassy defense almost immediately became inconsequential, even in the eyes of U.S. political leaders and planners.

The fact was, as a result of that specific attack, as decisively foiled as it was, the United States would never regain momentum in Vietnam in the eyes of its own people, as well as with those around the world.

After the fight for the embassy was over and the enemy eliminated, those of us in Saigon could not foresee how badly the United States would be shaken, how its spirit at home would be broken, how its citizens were so ill prepared to accept such a shocking report from the embassy, even though at the end of the Tet Offensive, Communist military forces were thoroughly thrashed and the Viet Cong as a viable military force ceased to exist.

Yet, Ho Chi Minh could argue, as did Churchill nearly three decades earlier, that in his war against the Americans, never had so many of his countrymen "owed so much to so few." For back in the United States, the psychological impact of the embassy strike was such that the country thought it was beaten—and, so it was, even though its forces stood victorious and unbent on the battlefield. ☆

Wilburn "Bud" Meador enlisted in the U.S. Marines in May 1965, graduated from Marine Security Guard School in August 1966 and was posted to the U.S. Embassy in Saigon from January 1967 to January 1969. Currently, he is an assistant professor in the Department of Military History at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College at Ft. Leavenworth.