

The 1968 May Offensive
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During the first week of May 1968, the streets of Saigon were jammed with not only the usual poisonous traffic that clogged its streets and alleys, but also with thousands of additional refugees who had fled recent combat in the countryside. Only three months before, the city and the world, had been jolted by a surprise attack that later came to be known as the Communist Tet Offensive. Enemy forces were reported to have taken a terrific beating in that fighting, and yet the city was now abuzz with rumors that a North Vietnamese colonel had defected and given up the plans to yet another combined North Vietnamese-Viet Cong attack on Saigon. Also, rumor had it that small groups of enemy soldiers were all ready infiltrating the city disguised as civilians in preparation for this new attack. With all this advance publicity, many wondered if they would actually attack? The week before the attack the perimeter of Saigon and its suburbs had been awash in the harsh yellow glare of flares that floated slowly down from circling aircraft overhead. Occasionally a flare would drift over our neighborhood, casting strange flickering shadows that would dart and dance across the rooftops and alleys that abutted our villa on Trung Minh Ky street. Guard duty became a surreal experience mixed with fear and paranoia. Standing alone on the roof of the villa, the surrounding neighborhood dark and quiet, and the only traffic on the street down below an occasional speeding military police Jeep, you had ample opportunity to imagine a solitary sniper waiting somewhere with you in his sights.

So on the night of May 5, when the enemy finally did begin to attack key points around the city, US and South Vietnamese forces were ready and on full military alert. When the attacks started we could see the fighting from our observation perch on the roof of the Daspo villa. We could see the tracers from attacking US fighter aircraft and helicopter gunships setting fires in the Chinese section of Cholon, as well as other areas of the city. We could also hear incoming rounds impacting at nearby Tan Son Nhut Airbase. The seemingly impossible had happened again. With the whole city watching and waiting, the enemy had decided to attack Saigon once again.

Early the next morning Sergeant Harry Breedlove, Sp5 Ed Hawes and myself prepared our equipment to go out and record this evolving new action of the war. Breedlove would shoot stills, Hawes motion picture and I would record sound. As we gathered our camera gear and weapons we listened for more war information on AFVN, the local armed forces radio station. Surprisingly there was no mention of this new combat by the station announcers, even though we could hear over our radio, the sounds of sporadic automatic weapons fire in the background as they talked. Our team O.I.C. (Officer in charge), 1Lt Richard Griffith soon received word that there was a firefight underway at the old French National Cemetery. Located just outside the perimeter of Tan Son Nhut Airbase, the cemetery was only a ten minute drive from our villa. Breedlove, Hawes and I scrambled into one of the team Jeeps and headed north. At the main entrance to Tan Son Nhut we turned left on to Plantation Road and then parked in front of the Saigon bureau of the military's "Stars and Stripes" newspaper. Other news organizations were already there, milling around out front. Civilian cameramen and news reporters stood around smoking

and talking among themselves. Nobody seemed in a hurry to make the two block walk to the war.

The French National Cemetery was filled with South Vietnamese military dead from the earlier French-Indochina War of the 1940's and '50's. The irony of covering combat while in a graveyard, especially while surrounded by the remains of others killed by this war, was not lost any of us. During the days that followed we would "commute" to the action in our Jeep, often passing through neighborhoods that were still untouched by the war. Here life and business was going on as usual. At one intersection we stopped for a large European woman who had two small children in tow. They crossed the street in front of us as Vietnamese merchants sold their wares and people went about their business as if there was no war being waged just a few blocks away. This was a place of strange contrasts and more than a little irony.

On the way to the cemetery we passed Associated Press photographer Al Chang, who was walking in the opposite direction. A former military photographer, Al was headed back to his office to develop his film and transmit his pictures back to New York. Vietnam was not Al's first war, and he all ready had years of experience covering this one, but he had seen enough of this particular firefight. Before he moved on, Al told us that one photographer, Charlie Eggleston of United Press International had been killed and another photographer, Co Rentmeester from Life Magazine had been wounded in the cemetery already. Although we didn't know it at the time, pictures from the cemetery fight would appear in the next issue of Life.

We carefully made our way along a low wall that surrounded the cemetery. We could see South Vietnamese troops moving forward, and the sound of small arms fire told us we were getting close to the action. Harry decided to temporarily split the team up, sending Hawes to find a way on top of a building that was adjacent to the cemetery, thus allowing him to shoot the action from a more aerial perspective. Harry and I then climbed over the wall into the cemetery, making our way towards the firing ahead of us. We used the rows of headstones, and a series of concrete drainage ditches that crisscrossed the cemetery as cover. Ahead of us we could see South Vietnamese soldiers hunkered down inside those same ditches. At one point we paused to check out the action ahead. Groups of troops continued to move forward and I could see a thin spiral of black smoke drifting across the sky. The staccato sound of automatic weapons fire echoed off the tombstones and the steady wail of a nearby siren added an almost surreal effect to the scene. Harry began to take pictures while I recorded the ambient sounds of combat. We watched as a Vietnamese soldier carried a wounded friend piggyback style, away from the fighting. Suddenly bullets began to kick up the dirt around them. Harry and I suddenly realized that we were in that same line of fire as well, and so we both dove back into the relative safety of the drainage ditch.

Rolling over on my back, I placed my microphone over the top of the ditch to continue to record the firing and then smoked a cigarette. The sun was now high in the sky and the heat was intense. I took a drink from my canteen and with nothing better to do began to scan the scenery around me. I became aware of a group of airmen perched on top of a

barracks building located just inside the perimeter wire of Tan Son Nhut. The men were sitting on the slanted roof watching the action in the cemetery. They were dressed in shorts and t-shirts and I could see that they were drinking beer. Wow. War as spectator sport, I thought. I smoked a lot in those days. Up to three packs or more a day. The nicotine stained my fingertips and caused my hands to tremble and my heart to pound. However, there were more immediate ways to die back then. While the US airmen drank their cold beer from the roof of their barracks, I could see a small Vietnamese boy darting among the ARVN troops, handing out warm water from a large tin container.

After the firing died down some, we joined up with Vietnamese troops who were now policing up the battlefield. We saw what appeared to be a Vietnamese civilian fire his pistol into the body of what I had thought was a dead Viet Cong soldier. If he wasn't dead before, he sure as hell was now. Here and there we could see the bodies of more enemy soldiers lying about. Crouched next to a large monument that seemed to mark the center of the cemetery we saw a group of South Vietnamese soldiers who had been wounded in the battle, and in the middle of this cluster a small command post with an American advisor was hunkered down next to his ARVN counterpart. The battle seemed to have moved on. And then we did something totally unexpected and totally out of character for combat photography. Harry and I decided to take a break and have some lunch! And why not? We were only a couple of minutes drive from our "office." Gathering up Ed Hawes back at the Stars and Stripes bureau, we drove back to the villa. While there, I traded my Nagra tape recorder for a still camera, and after an hour or so Harry Breedlove and I, along with 1Lt. Richard Griffith, returned to the area of the French National Cemetery. From then on, the lieutenant would lead our combat teams, and from then on those of us who followed him into battle were known as "Griffith's Guerrillas."

Once back at the cemetery we discovered that the action had spilled out into the adjacent neighborhoods. As we hugged the outside of the cemetery wall, where it ran parallel to Plantation road, we saw a group of medics carrying a stretcher run from the road to a point a few meters away from us. They quickly picked up a body there and began to run at a crouch back to the waiting ambulance. A man's arm dangled limply from the stretcher. Moments later I watched in disbelief as a flatbed truck loaded with bodies speed past us. The corpses resembled stacks of wood rather than people. As I was trying to get my grain to comprehend what I had just seen, I heard the voice of Lt. Griffith calling to Harry and I to join him across the street. Two Viet Cong soldiers had been discovered hiding underneath a nearby schoolhouse. Moments later I found myself looking into the face of the enemy. It wasn't exactly what I had expected. He looked so very, very young. Hardly the dedicated killer I had come to expect the enemy to be. He and his companion had been captured just across the street from where Harry and I had been working that morning. I wondered if I had ever been in the cross hairs of his AK-47 rifle.

Later, the three of us moved carefully down what appeared to be a nearly deserted Plantation Road. There was firing nearby, but the silence of the street was eerie. I dashed

into a dry goods store to reload my camera. As I moved through the door, I discovered that I was not alone. A small group of young South Vietnamese soldiers were busy looting the place. Stuffing their pockets with things they could never afford to buy on their meager army pay. Not knowing how welcome an American with a camera was at that moment, I slowly backed out of the store, grinning and flashing a peace sign with my fingers. Moments later, I found myself looking down into the peaceful face of a dead Viet Cong soldier. He looked more asleep than dead. Looking closer, I saw that someone had used his upturned ear as an ash tray. Nearby, one of his comrades lay crumpled next to a rocket-propelled-grenade launcher, his body tossed in a pile by the violence of his death.

Our small trio zigzagged up the street, running from doorway to doorway toward a ¾ ton truck with a mounted .50 caliber machine gun that was firing in to the houses across the street. Harry was carrying a large 16mm Arriflex BL motion picture camera on his shoulder. As he stopped to set up for a shot I heard him yell out in pain. I looked over in stunned surprise at my friend, who was now lying on the ground, his camera at his feet. I froze for a moment and then above the din of weapons fire I heard our lieutenant yell at me to get over and help Harry.

Lt. Griffith and I got to Harry and the lieutenant began to cut open his pants leg and apply a field dressing to his wound. I stopped, stood up, and made a picture of the scene. Hell of a scrapbook snapshot, I thought. Looking at that photograph in the safety of my own home years later, I still agree with that thought. Later a South Vietnamese medic applied a more professional dressing to the small bloody hole in Harry's leg. It was only after things had quieted down a bit that we noticed that Harry had been wounded in front of a photography business. Some of the studio lighting equipment stood out in the street. It had probably been dragged out of the building by the owner, in an attempt to save it from the approaching combat. Back on his feet, Harry fetched up his camera and we began to make our way back to where our Jeep was parked. As we moved up the street, I looked back over my shoulder and saw that the sign on a nearby Shell Oil service station was on fire and had burned down to where the letter "S" was missing, leaving the word "hell" surrounded by a halo of greasy black smoke and fire. We all stopped and Harry recorded the scene. I made a still photo of it as well. Years later, when I look at that picture, I know that it was at that moment that I discovered that photographs were capable of recording much more than just "the facts." I now knew that photography could be about much, much more. Crazy as it now seems, it was at that moment that I "knew" what I wanted to do as my life's career. It was at that moment that I dedicated myself to a life as a photojournalist.

For the next few days life in the Villa settled into a kind of combat routine. Because the fighting was so close to Tan Son Nhut Airbase, flights in and out of the base were restricted to aircraft on combat missions. This effectively prevented those members of the team who were out on assignment when the fighting started from getting back to Saigon. Our Vietnamese maids did not show up for work, so those of us who were there in the villa had to pretty much shift for ourselves. Our days were divided up into driving to the war during the day, typing captions and boxing film for shipment during the evening, and pulling guard duty overnight. In-between those chores we managed to find time to eat,

drink, and continue the nightly poker game as our little black and white television set played reruns of old stateside programs. Outside there was the constant whine of aircraft passing overhead and the thud of aerial bombardment and artillery missions out in the suburbs.

Two days after Sergeant Breedlove was hit, Lt. Griffith was also wounded. Earlier we had watched a couple of laughing South Vietnamese Rangers pull the body of a fat middle-aged woman out of a shell hole filled with dark, stagnant water. When they saw our cameras they offered to repeat the performance. We refused, so they dropped the body back in the water and moved on. Nearby, World War Two vintage Navy dive-bombers were pounding the neighborhood with napalm. The noise was so intense it hurt my ears. I could hear shrapnel falling around us. All my senses were on overload. Fear, heat, smell, and the noise all crowding my sense of reality. All around me was the chaos of this incredible destruction, like the place was being ripped and pounded apart by some gigantic angry child.

We were in the Cholon section of the city and had been moving down a narrow street with a column of South Vietnamese Rangers, when we came under attack. The lieutenant and SFC Al Batungbacal, who was shooting motion picture footage, were at the head of that column when they walked into an ambush. While covering their retreat, Lt. Griffith was wounded. During the retreat I found myself running sideways, afraid that I might be shot in the back. Eventually everyone scrambled back to the relative safety of an American tank that was sitting at the end of the street, acting as a blocking force. After we pulled Lt. Griffith to the safety of a deserted Vietnamese home, we cut back his uniform and applied a field dressing to his bloody arm. I then wrapped a microphone cable around his arm to form a tourniquet to stop the flow of blood, using the microphone to lever the knot tight. As soon as we could, we got back to our Jeep and raced through the eerily deserted streets, looking for the nearby Cholon Racetrack where we knew there was a Vietnamese aid station. Fresh in our minds was the story of the five Australian journalists who, just days before, had been gunned down in this very same neighborhood, at a Viet Cong roadblock. Fortunately we found the race track and a South Vietnamese military surgeon cleaned and bandaged Lt. Griffith's wound. We then drove him to the US Army Third Field Hospital. From there he was eventually sent to Japan for further surgery. It would be months before Lt. Griffith would return to Daspo. Later that day we found out that yet another member of our team, Sp4 Ted Acheson, had also been wounded while on assignment up north in I-Corps. Three members of the team being wounded in the space of a week was probably the highest casualty rate for Daspo during the war.

Several days later, myself, Sp4 Talmage Harbison, and Sp4 Al Lambert, were assigned to photograph cleanup operations around the Y Bridge, and area located just south of downtown Saigon. The worst moment of the operation came when members of the 9th Division unit we were photographing slowly checked a wounded Viet Cong soldier to see if he had been booby trapped. The wounded man lay in agony as the troopers carefully prodded in and around his body for trip wires and explosives. When they were satisfied the man was safe to move, one of their medics gave him first aid.

While the May-Offensive was a costly and bloody affair, it did not last as long as the earlier, Tet-Offensive. Enemy forces quietly melted away and life in Saigon quickly returned to what passed for normal. A week later I was on a commercial jet bound for Honolulu. My first of three temporary duty (TDY) trips to Vietnam completed.