

March 24, 1975

TO: Moncrieff J. Spear, Consul General
FROM: Edmund W. Sprague, Province Representative, Phu Bon
SUBJECT: Report on Phu Bon Province and Convoy from 15-18 March 1975

At approximately 1600 on 15 March a convoy from Pleiku reached the outskirts of Hau Bon City limits, Phu Bon Province.

The leading elements of the convoy consisted of approximately 15 tanks, 15 APC's and one Ranger Group (probably the 23rd Gp).

The convoy appeared to be orderly and well organized.

The lead elements later stopped in Cheo Rego (Hau Bon). The tanks, APC's and trucks hauling troops were observed selling rides on their vehicles to Phu Bon civilians.

The lead elements departed Cheo Reo and the civilians living in Cheo Reo went into a state of panic. Every available vehicle was loaded and headed south QL-7B behind the convoy.

Shortly after departure of the leading elements numerous vehicles of every description began arriving from Pleiku.

Late in the evening the number of vehicles began to taper off. The civilian part of the convoy stopped along the road to eat and sleep.

The next day Sunday, March 16, vehicles continued to stream through the town.

Numerous vehicles were military and obviously not part of any organized unit.

The vehicles continued to arrive through Sunday.

On Sunday, March 16, all the Phu Bon National Police deserted. The untold number of vehicles that arrived resulted in confusion, traffic jams and complete panic of the civilian population.

This reporter observed Vietnamese soldiers and police confiscating civilian vehicles and Honda's by force.

On Monday, 17 March, vehicles of various descriptions continued to stream through Cheo Reo. Included were many various military vehicles seemingly without organization or command.

During Monday this reporter went to the city to evaluate the situation. I observed members of the ARVN Rangers looting local stores. After looting, they would fire a burst of automatic fire with their AR-16 rifles or throw a grenade into the store.

I also observed Rangers who while looting stores, shoot two children who appeared to be 2 or 3 years old.

Late in the day little fuel was available in the city. Numerous fire fights between various military and National Police resulted over loot, fuel and vehicles.

Monday night the RF officer who was responsible for security of the USAID compound, smashed his radio and deserted his post, his troops followed him shortly after.

This left me with two hired guards to provide security for the USAID and ICCS compounds, which are co-located.

At 1100 hours Monday night, Rangers broke thru the outer gate of the compound. They shot the locks off all doors in the ICCS compound and stole every thing they could carry, e.g. furniture, refrigerators, and took remaining ICCS vehicles.

They then attempted to enter the USAID area of the compound. I spoke to them at the gate explaining who I was and that the compound belonged to the U.S. Embassy. They appeared to be satisfied and walked back about 30 meters then turned and stared firing their weapons at me. I had my two security guards withdraw to the rear of the compound. One security guard told the Rangers if they passed the gate he would kill them. This seemed to help as they then left.

Soon after, 5 to 6 National Policemen came to the gate. One held the rank of Captain. They asked if I had any gas. I told them that I had only enough gas for my vehicles. One policeman then brought up his AR-16 weapon and put it to my throat and said, "Give me your gas or you die". I told him that I was a representative of the U.S. Embassy and he would encounter serious problems if he harmed me. My security guards told the policeman that if he killed the American he would die also. The policeman slammed the butt of his weapon on the ground, called me a few nasty names and left.

During the night many of the same threats were made against me by ARVN military and National Police. The compound was continually fired upon during the night by the above mentioned.

On 17 March, four 2½ ton trucks from the Ranger Group arrived at the Cheo Reo Ethnic Minority Boarding School and dumped four loads of various weapons and radios on the ground and then left. Most of the weapons were AR-16's, M-60 machine guns and PRC-25 radios. Later the same day the trucks were observed loading loot from local stores and selling rides to civilians.

On March 17, the Province Chief called all Vietnamese officers and enlisted men to sector headquarters and told them to get prepared to leave Phu Bon.

The Vietnamese soldiers returned to their units and told the Montagnards they would remain behind to fight.

I also mention that all the Vietnamese soldiers threw their weapons away and many put on civilian clothes.

On March 17, this reporter evacuated 200 million piasters on Air America chopper to Nha Trang from the Phu Bon Treasury.

On 17-18 March, all RF/PF Montagnard soldiers returned to their villages, took off their uniforms and hid or threw away their weapons.

On March 17, I met Major RCOM Ploi, the Phu Thien District Chief and Major Nay Pun, the Thuan Man District Chief, both are Jarai Montagnard officers. Majors Ploi and Pun told me they met with Lt. Colonel Bao the Province Chief and he told them they would stay behind with Montagnard troops and fight. Major Ploi explained to the Province Chief that he only had 10 soldiers left, and how could he fight. The Province Chief told him that the Montagnard officers who didn't remain behind and fight he would kill. Ploi, Pun and all Montagnards remained in Phu Bon.

On the afternoon of 17 March I observed two ARVN Rangers shoot and kill the son of Major Nay Guh, the Phu Bon Sector Tactical Commander. They then took the body and threw it into a burning building. The boy was 14-15 years old.

On Tuesday morning 18 March at 1015 hours, two Air America helicopters arrived to evacuate my staff and I from the compound. When the first helicopter was about to land, numerous ARVN soldiers pushed through the gate of the compound. One ARVN Captain held his weapon on me and told me if I didn't give him a ride he would shoot. I told him the other chopper was about to land and would pick him up. We then took off and promptly instructed the other chopper not to land.

After about 5 minutes in the air, we observed numerous soldiers looting the compound and driving away all USAID vehicles.

On my way to Nha Trang I observed from the air more than 3,000 vehicles of various types north and south of Cheo Reo. They were not moving.

As the chopper headed south, I was able to observe route QL-7B, approximately 5 km south of Cheo Reo where the NVA had rocketed another part of the convoy. I observed 4 trucks that were destroyed and about 20-25 head or wounded laying on the road.

OTHER OBSERVATIONS AND COMMENTS: Already mentioned. After the lead elements of the convoy passed through Cheo Reo, at no time did this reporter observe any ARVN officer assuming command although I did observe numerous Army and Police officers on various vehicles.

Most vehicles appeared to have little gas and trucks 2½ ton size had sometimes 40 or more people on it.

There was little water or food available for the civilians in the convoy.

At no time did any of the civilians abuse me, or did I observe them looting or killing.

I observed ARVN soldiers loot province warehouse of all rice.

I observed Rangers take all rice from refugees that came out of Thuan Man District.

I observed military trucks run over civilian refugees walking along the road.

Phu Bon province military destroyed four 105-mm artillery pieces around the city on 15 March, then deserted. No Communist troops were anywhere near the city at this time. (I didn't find this out until 17 March.) Numerous other weapons such as 57 RR were also destroyed.

All GVN officials except two had departed the province by 13 March.