

157 10 A 030 (HEUTE THROUGH)
BY ALAN BAWSON

SAIGON (UPI) -- A LONE SOUTH VIETNAMESE PILOT RETURNING FROM A COMBAT MISSION JOCKEYED HIS FIGHTER PLANE OUT OF THE GLARING MORNING SUN AND BOOMED THE INDEPENDENCE PALACE OF PRESIDENT NGUYEN VAN THIEU TODAY, BUT THIEU AND HIS FAMILY WERE UNHARMED. ACTIVITIES FEARED A POSSIBLE COUP D'ETAT AGAINST THE PRESIDENT. THIEU BLASTED A 24-HOUR CURFEW ON THE CAPITAL AND LOYALIST AIRBORNE TROOPS WERE DEPLOYED AROUND SAIGON ON SPECIAL ALERT.

GOVERNMENT SOURCES SAID TWO BOMBS HIT WITHIN 10 YARDS OF THE SOUTHEAST CORNER OFFICE OCCUPIED BY THIEU DURING NORMAL WORKING HOURS. THE EXPLOSIONS KNOCKED DOWN A PART OF THE WALL, KILLING THREE PERSONS AND WOUNDING FOUR OTHERS.

MOST HEAVILY DAMAGED WAS THE OFFICE OF COL. VO VAN CAM, THIEU'S CHIEF OF STAFF, THE SOURCES SAID. THIEU SPOKE BRIEFLY ON NATIONAL RADIO, SAYING HE WAS SAFE AND MOVING: "I AM DETERMINED TO REMAIN IN OFFICE."

HE DENIED THE CHIEF REPRESENTED ANY SERIOUS COUP ATTEMPT. "I HOPE THIS WAS NOT A COUP FROM THE MILITARY, BUT ONLY A GROUP OF PEOPLE WHO IN THE PAST HAVE SAID THEY WANT TO OVERTHROW THE GOVERNMENT AND WORK OUT A POLITICAL SOLUTION (TO THE VIETNAM WAR)," THIEU SAID.

PHONES IMMEDIATELY LINKED FORMER PRIME MINISTER AND AIR FORCE COMMANDER NGUYEN CAO KY WITH THE BOMBING, BUT KY HIMSELF DENIED THE REPORTS.

HIS PRESS OFFICER ISSUED A STATEMENT SAYING IN PART: "THE FORMER PRESIDENT DOES NOT KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT THE ACTION OF THE PILOT." THREE HOURS AFTER THIEU'S SPEECH, AND SIX HOURS AFTER THE 8:30 A.M. BOMBING ATTACK -- OFFICIALS LIFTED THE 24-HOUR CURFEW.

BUT TROOPS REMAINED ON ALERT, AND AN HOUR AFTER THE LIFTING OF THE CURFEW FEW PERSONS WERE BACK ON THE SAIGON STREETS. THE BOMBING SPARKED IMMEDIATE RUMORS OF A COUP AGAINST THIEU, WHO WAS BEING STRONGLY CRITICIZED FOR ORDERING SOUTH VIETNAMESE TROOPS TO WITHDRAW FROM MUCH OF THE NORTHERN PART OF THE COUNTRY AND YIELD IT TO NORTH VIETNAMESE AND VIET CONG TROOPS WITHOUT A FIGHT.

THE COMMUNISTS NOW CONTROL 13 OF SOUTH VIETNAM'S 44 PROVINCES AND MONDAY SHELTER SIX MAJOR TOWNS IN THE POPULOUS MEKONG DELTA SOUTH OF SAIGON.

THE PILOT WHO BOMBED THE PALACE WAS IDENTIFIED AS LT. NGUYEN THANH TRUNG, A NATIVE OF NORTH VIETNAM WHO WAS A REGULAR AIR FORCE OFFICER. MILITARY SOURCES SAID TRUNG AND TWO OTHER PILOTS TOOK OFF IN THEIR F5 JET FIGHTERS EARLY TODAY FROM BIEN HOA, 14 MILES NORTHEAST OF SAIGON, FOR A BOMBING RAID ON THE PROVINCIAL CAPITAL OF PHAN BANG, 155 MILES NORTHEAST OF THE CAPITAL.

AFTER THE BOMBING STRIKES, TRUNG STREAKED TOWARD SAIGON, SHRIEKING OVER THE CAPITAL OUT OF THE EARLY MORNING SUN. HE MADE A HIGH-LEVEL PASS OVER THE CREAMY-WHITE DOWNTOWN PRESIDENTIAL OFFICE AND RESIDENCE, THEN SWOOPED IN THROUGH ANTI-AIRCRAFT FIRE FROM THE PALACE GROUNDS.

THERE WAS NO INDICATION THAT THE BOMBING WAS THE SIGNAL FOR A COUP D'ETAT. NO UNUSUAL TROOP MOVEMENTS WERE REPORTED, AND RADIO SAIGON AND ALL COMMUNICATIONS FACILITIES REMAINED OPERATING.

PRIG. GEN. PHAN PHUNG TIEN, COMMANDER OF TAN SON NHUT AIR BASE AT THE EDGE OF SAIGON, WAS ARRESTED BY MILITARY POLICE. BUT GOVERNMENT SOURCES INDICATED TIEN WAS HELD BECAUSE HIS SUPPOSEDLY ALERT INTERCEPTOR FIGHTERS HAD FAILED TO STOP THE PALACE ATTACK, RATHER THAN BECAUSE OF ANY INVOLVEMENT IN A PLOT AGAINST THIEU.

TIEN, LIKE MOST AIR FORCE OFFICERS, IS CONSIDERED LOYAL TO KY, WHO EMERGED FROM POLITICAL RETIREMENT TWO WEEKS AGO TO CALL FOR MORE VIGOROUS ACTION AGAINST THE COMMUNIST OFFENSIVE.

THE WHEREABOUTS OF THE PILOT OF THE ATTACK PLANE WERE NOT KNOWN. MILITARY SOURCES SAID THAT AFTER HIS BOMBING RUN TO PHAN BANG, THE PILOT HAD LESS THAN 100 MILES OF FUEL LEFT IN HIS SUPERSONIC FIGHTER-BOMBER.

A VIET CONG SPOKESMAN IN SAIGON SAID HE HAD NO INFORMATION ON THE INCIDENT, ALTHOUGH COMMUNIST TERRITORY IN VIETNAM WOULD BE THE ONLY PLACE THE LIEUTENANT COULD LAND HIS AIRCRAFT.

INCLUDES PREVIOUS
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