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With a grenade and a coat hanger to defend themselves, the two men awaited the Vietcong at the head of the stairs. A Drama in Real Life

Ordeal at the Embassy

By DAVID REED



WHEN George D. Jacobs, a retired U.S. Army colonel and "mission coordinator" of the American embassy in Saigon, went to bed at midnight last January 30, he thought he would get a good night's sleep. It was the beginning of *Tet*, which marks the Vietnamese lunar New Year, and both the communists and the allies had announced that they would observe a ceasefire. Allied intelligence suspected that the

enemy might stage a surprise attack during the truce, but Jacobson had spent the evening driving around the city and had seen nothing unusual. So, when he returned to his house in the embassy compound, he retired immediately and was soon asleep.

The next thing Jacobson knew, the two-story house was rocked by an explosion which shattered windows and rained broken glass on his bed. For a moment, Jacobson thought that the communists had hit his house by mistake. But then a deafening fusillade of automatic-weapon fire erupted beneath his windows. He realized that the main embassy building, 35 yards away, was under attack. He glanced at his watch. It was 2:45 a.m.

The Vietcong and North Vietnamese forces had treacherously taken advantage of the cease-fire to unleash a massive offensive against more than 100 South Vietnamese cities and towns. Some 3000 elite Red troops had slipped into Saigon in civilian clothing, mingling unobtrusively with the thousands of people coming in from the countryside to join their relatives for *Tet*. They had even test-fired their weapons the night before, but authorities had not noticed because of the firecrackers being exploded to welcome the New Year.

Soon after midnight, the Vietcong fanned out across the city, carrying forged curfew passes. Units attacked Tan Son Nhut airport, the residence of President Nguyen Van Thieu, the

headquarters of the U.S. Military Assistance Command and the Vietnamese Joint General Staff, a radio station, troop billets and police stations. Yet another group of 19 specially selected commandos struck at the American embassy, a \$2,600,000 building officially opened four months previously. If the Vietcong could seize the embassy, even briefly, it would be a shattering blow to U.S. prestige.

Using a plastic charge, the V.C. blasted a hole in the nine-foot-high wall surrounding the four-acre embassy compound and poured through. They fired RPG-2s (anti-tank-grenade launchers) at the embassy, but, because of a protective sunscreen of terrazzo blocks designed to withstand blasts, the shells did little damage. One of the five U.S. Marines on guard managed to close the embassy's front doors, made of three-inch-thick teak. Then, remembering the Vietnamese watchman outside, he opened them again, yanked the frightened man inside, then slammed and bolted the teak-wood barrier. The V.C. fired round after round from their RPG-2s and machine guns at the doors, but the doors held.

A reaction force of Marines and MPs arrived within minutes. Some vaulted the wall into the compound; others remained outside, pouring fire at the V.C. So many weapons were being shot off that it sounded like one sustained roar. One after another, attackers and defenders crumpled to the ground.

Jacobson, watching from his second-floor bedroom window, tore off his pajamas and climbed into a pair of trousers. "I prefer to face a crisis with my pants on," he explained later. His assistant, Robert Josephson, 37, who had been sleeping in the next room, dressed hastily and joined him. Nervously, the two men debated whether to make a break for safety. They decided that it would be suicide to venture out. Moreover, although the bedroom walls were being drilled with bullet holes, far more bullets seemed to be hitting the first floor. They concluded that they would be relatively safe where they were—for a while.

They ransacked the upstairs, frantically searching for a weapon. Jacobson found nothing but a fragmentation grenade. Calmly, he crouched at the head of the stairway, ready to hurl the grenade if the V.C. started up. But he wondered if a single grenade could stop them. All that Josephson could find for a weapon was a wooden coat hanger.

From time to time, one of the two men would leave the top of the stairs to glance out a window. They saw V.C., wearing civilian clothing with identifying red arm- and neckbands, running from one firing position to another. If Jacobson and Josephson had had rifles, they could have picked off several V.C. They tried to telephone the Marine defenders in the main building, but could get through only to the Marine guard in the old embassy building, a couple of miles away. The guard there,

however, was able to relay their reports to the embattled compound.

A 55-year-old combat veteran of World War II, Jacobson had served nine years in South Vietnam, as an adviser to the Vietnamese army and as an official in the civic-action program. After 26 years' Army service, he had retired, joined the Agency for International Development and been named to his current post at the embassy. One of the plums that went with the mission-coordinator job—linking the efforts of various American civilian agencies in Vietnam with the military—was the embassy-compound residence in which he was now trapped. Josephson had served four and a half years in Vietnam, first in the Air Force and then as a special assistant to Jacobson and Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker. This was supposed to be his next to last night in Vietnam; he had planned to board a plane for Washington the morning of February 1.

From his years as a soldier, Jacobson knew that the battle hinged on who would be able to reinforce first. If the V.C. managed to do so, then the Americans—Jacobson and Josephson included—might all be killed. But, as the hours ticked by, firing lessened. It was obvious that the V.C. were not being reinforced. The spirits of the two men rose.

Then, at 6:45 a.m., returning to the top of the stairs after a telephone call, Jacobson and Josephson got the shock of their lives: they saw that the two doors leading into the house from the compound were ajar and

that there were muddy footprints in the entranceway—plus bloodstains. The V.C. were in the living room below.

A showdown now was inevitable. The V.C. would be coming up the stairs soon—either to get a better field of fire, or because they had been driven from the first floor. They would know by now that their mission had failed and that only death awaited them. They would be determined to take as many Americans with them as possible. Jacobson and Josephson would be the first targets.

As the two men waited, several MPs and Marines entered the house. "Watch it, there are V.C. downstairs!" Jacobson shouted. Gunfire erupted, and a Marine screamed in pain. The Americans withdrew, taking the wounded man with them. Jacobson and Josephson, their nerves raw from more than five hours of agonizing tension, were alone again with the V.C.

Ten minutes—an eternity—went by. Neither man spoke. Then Jacobson was lifted off the floor by two violent explosions. Josephson reeled backward, thinking that the house had been blown out from under them. They finally realized that the Americans had thrown two concussion grenades into the entranceway in an effort to drive out the V.C. A strange silence came over the house. Jacobson listened intently, but heard nothing. Was the battle over? Then he understood: he had been deafened temporarily by the blasts.

Jacobson could not hear the clunk-

ing sounds as the Americans followed up by throwing three canisters of tear gas into the entranceway. Thus, when the canisters exploded, he got a full dose of gas in the face. Josephson was almost as badly affected. Partially blinded, struggling to breathe and gagging with nausea, the two men stumbled into the bedroom. Jacobson kicked out a window and screamed to the troops below to throw up gas masks and a weapon.

At great risk, 20-year-old Pfc. Paul Healey, of Holbrook, Mass., sprinted across the lawn and threw masks and a .45-caliber pistol through the window. Sgt. John H. Shook, 34, of Newton, N.C., and Maj. Hillel Schwartz, 33, of Philadelphia, Pa., tossed up two clips of ammunition and half a dozen cans of riot gas.

With the masks on, although their eyes still streamed tears, Jacobson and Josephson could see once more. They returned to the stairs, and Jacobson threw the tear-gas canisters to the floor below. His hearing returned partially, and he realized that the firing had stopped outside. The battle for the embassy was over—almost. The finale was yet to come inside the house.

Knowing that the gas would drive the enemy up the stairs at any moment, Jacobson backed away from the staircase and crouched behind a wall. It would afford some concealment, but no protection from bullets—it was made of plywood. Josephson went into a bedroom, still clutching the coat hanger.

Jacobson's heart was pounding as he held the .45. He remembered with dread that he had had the reputation of being one of the worst shots in the Army.

Three minutes passed. Jacobson did not hear the V.C. come up the stairs. But he saw the barrel of a Chinese AK-47 automatic rifle suddenly pushed around the corner of the wall, a few feet from his chest. Bullets sprayed in an arc, stitching the plywood on both sides of him.

Jacobson leaped out from behind the wall—face to face with the V.C., who was still firing. Jacobson's first bullet spun the V.C. around. His second knocked the man down. Jacobson saw that he was dead.

The Americans waited for the other V.C. to come up the stairs. A minute ticked by. No one appeared. They edged to the stairs and looked down. There was no one in the entranceway. They concluded that the other V.C. had left the house earlier.

Jacobson and Josephson stepped over the body, went downstairs, knees shaking. Emerging into the now-peaceful compound, they took

off their gas masks and breathed the fresh morning air with delight. The tropical sun blazed overhead. The flower beds were alive with gorgeous color. Scattered there in the compound were the bodies of 18 other V.C. Five Americans were killed and fifteen wounded. When a reporter asked Jacobson some questions, he could hear his own voice only faintly. His face was haggard, his shirt soaked with perspiration. He felt very, very tired.

It was not until a week later that Josephson could get a plane home. Jacobson, who remained in Saigon, returned to his house soon after the battle. It was pierced with some 500 bullet holes. The furniture in the house was in splinters. Four suits and several shirts that had been hanging in a closet were in tatters. Jacobson glanced at a lacquer portrait of a Chinese elder that hung on a wall: a bullet, he saw, had drilled a hole neatly through the elder's heart. It was a miracle, he felt, that he and Josephson had escaped without so much as a scratch.



Complaint Department

AN ANGRY woman went into a Long Island store and sputtered, "It's about an electric iron I bought—"

"You wish to complain?" asked a clerk.

"Complain!" she retorted. "That I could do by mail. I have come here to *revile* someone!"

—Charles Jenson, quoted by Earl Wilson, Publishers-Hall Syndicate

A HARASSED housewife, describing a day that had been filled with frustrations, wound up with: "I even got a busy signal on Dial-a-Prayer."

—Contributed by Edith Done