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By Star's & Staffs

Damage Is Widespread

Red Shells Set Off Ammo Dump

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SAIGON — An estimated 500 tons of rockets, shells and other munitions went up in a thundering series of explosions early Wednesday when enemy mortars hit an ammo dump at Dong Tam, a major U.S. installation in the Mekong Delta.

Despite widespread damage — at least 25 buildings were said destroyed or badly damaged — casualties were relatively light. Two Americans were reported killed and 64 wounded.

At least two and possibly three Navy "Seawolf" helicopters were destroyed. One of the dead was reported to be a Navy pilot who was trying to get his craft

into the air and away from the nearby ammo dump.

The Dong Tam complex is home of the Army's 9th Inf. Div. It also is site of a Navy river port and a big civilian construction engineering base.

"It happened about 10 minutes after midnight," a 9th Div. officer said. "There was a great flash of light, then a fantastic explosion."

The officer said the concussion from the first explosion smashed windows and tore the roofs off buildings near the division headquarters, about a mile from the ammo dump.

He said the shock wave caused a vacuum that sucked emerging soldiers back into buildings and bunkers.

"The explosions went on for three or four hours," he said. "Shrapnel and debris were falling all over the base. This is what caused a lot of the injuries.

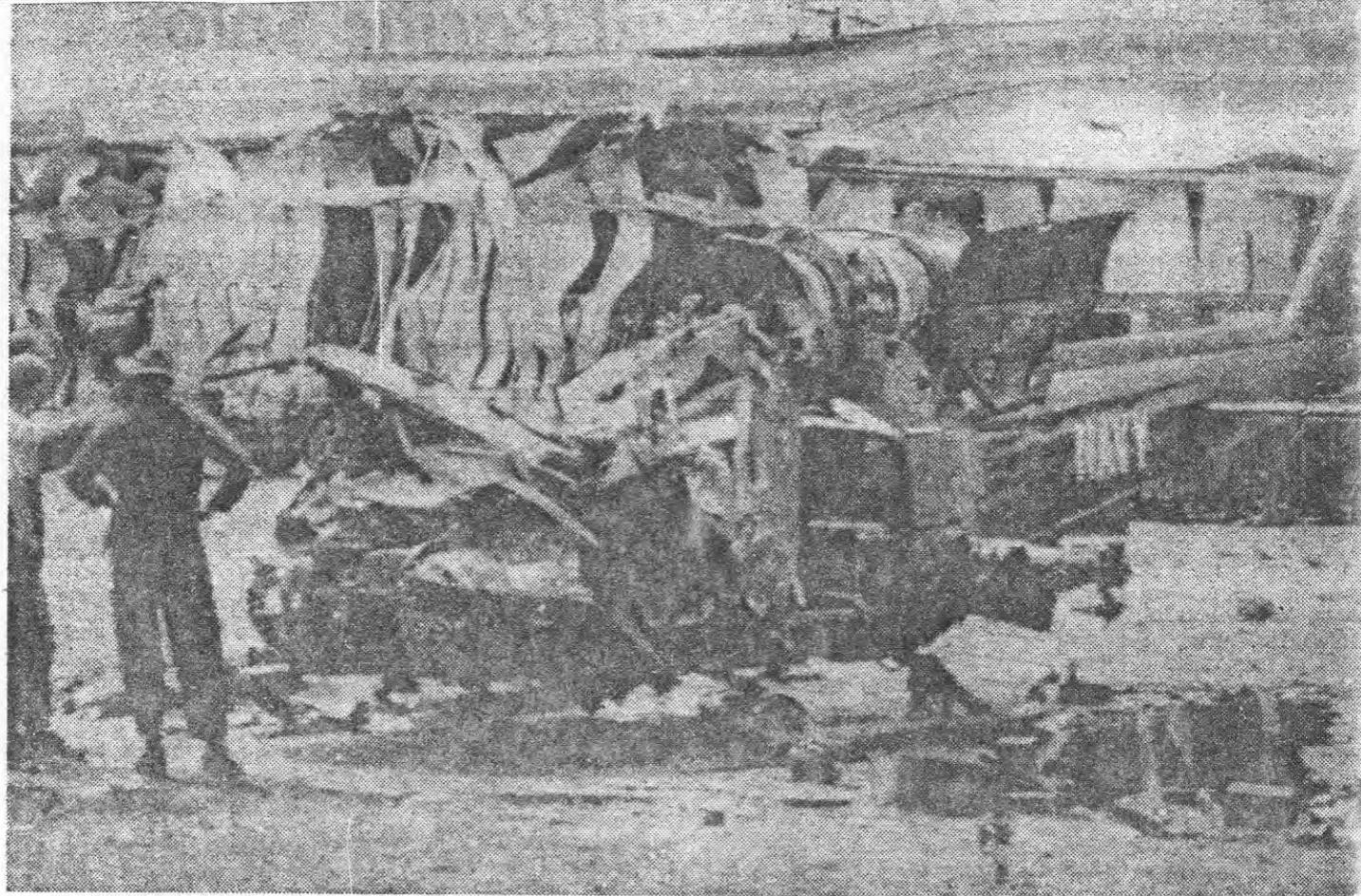
"There was a great red fireball over the ammo dump and you could hear the small arms ammo going off like popcorn between the big explosions."

A spokesman for the RMK-BRJ construction combine said the giant firm's Dong Tam offices and sheds, located a few hundred yards from the dump, were largely flattened, as were several U.S. Navy storage sheds in the area. The blasts also severely damaged more than 10 Navy billets about 400 yards from the ammo. At least ten of

the injured were reported to be Navy men.

Though there was heavy property damage, the deep reverberations behind which the munitions were stored prevented what could have been a complete disaster.

The dump was on the riverfront edge of the base, near the Navy facilities and helicopter pads. There was no immediate report on where the mortar shells came from, but it has been become a Viet Cong tactic to fire mortars and rockets at the base from nearby hamlets and settlements. This makes it hard or impossible for Allied forces to react quickly without taking the chance of hurting local residents.



Red Shells on Target

Navy helicopter pilots survey wreckage of a gunship in front of damaged warehouses at Dong Tam, South Vietnam. One flier was killed and another injured when the chopper was hurled to the

ground by concussions from the exploding ammo dump as they were trying to get the craft clear of the area. The blast was touch off by enemy mortars. Story on Page 6. (AP Radiopho