

6-24-68

Catholics—and even some Buddhists—regarded as a miracle. "After so much war," remarked one U.S. official, "it is survival that impresses the people, not destruction."  
W  
file  
706  
subj.  
date  
sub-cat.  
6/68

# Rocket Roulette 6/24/68

In the quiet hours just before dawn, Viet Cong gunners by twos and threes slipped from hiding places on the outskirts of Saigon and hurriedly set up the simple launching tubes of their 122-mm. rockets. Without bothering to take careful aim, they pointed the tubes in the direction of the sleepy capital city. Then, one after another, there were brief flashes of backblast and the keening sound of 41-pound warheads whistling off into the morning sky. Moments later, the deadly missiles slammed into Saigon, exploding in streets and squares, homes and shops, rousing their unlucky victims with a final, emphatic reveille. And long before the dust from the blasts settled, the Communist gun crews had disappeared without a trace into the surrounding swamplands.

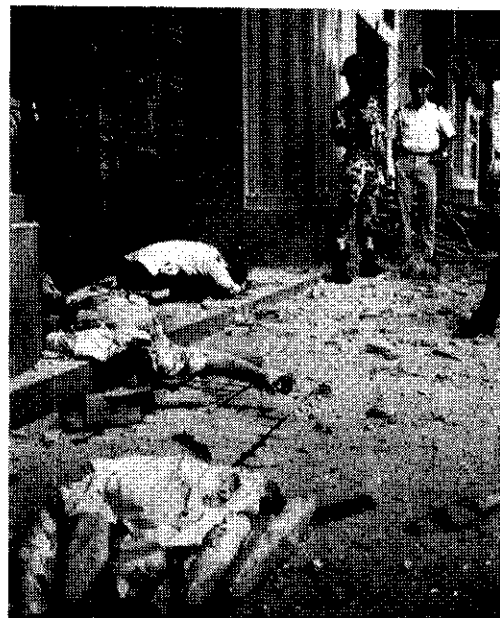
Thus did the enemy strike the capital of South Vietnam almost every day last week, a grim reminder that, although Communist troops are no longer fighting within the city itself, the siege of Saigon was far from over. Since early May, in fact, the steady rain of shells has killed nearly 150 South Vietnamese civilians and wounded almost 1,000 more.

No part of metropolitan Saigon was safe. One day, rockets pounded the sprawling Tan Son Nhut airport northwest of the city. On another, a shell landed on John F. Kennedy Square in front of the National Cathedral, bursting a bare 15 feet from a statue of the "Madonna of Peace." The statue escaped undamaged, a fact that many pious

For most Saigonese, however, survival was a matter of sheer luck. Shortly after one attack last week, NEWSWEEK's Robert Stokes ran to the balcony of his apartment and saw clouds of smoke rising in the gray dawn sky. "By the time I got downtown a few minutes later," Stokes reported, "one of the city's main streets, Tu Do, was paralyzed with traffic and milling crowds gaping at the damage. In front of one apartment building lay a woman. I recognized her as one of the countless peddlers who take up positions along the streets in the early morning hours to sell long loaves of French bread. Her wares were scattered near her lifeless body. Nearby was the spread-eagled corpse of a man decapitated by the same rocket blast. As newsmen and photographers clustered around, a tall, blond woman passed to enter the building. Glancing at the grisly sight, she clapped her hand over her mouth and rushed inside."

**Technique:** As the attacks went on, it was clear they were nearly impossible to stop. Even from the air, the enemy gun crews were all but invisible. It took only about two minutes for the guerrillas to set up their launchers on tripods, crossed bamboo stakes or mounds of sand and fire them electrically with plungers from about 15 feet away. The flashes from the tubes lasted seven-tenths of a second, and the shellings were usually over in less than ten minutes. With a range of 6 1/2 miles, the rockets could be launched from anywhere within an area of 164 square miles around the city, and some authorities estimated it would take 80,000 troops to cordon off the area.

Though it was true, as Gen. William



Associated Press Photos

Deadly missile: Random death dealt from the sky

### THE WAR IN VIETNAM

C. Westmoreland pointed out, that the attacks had no "real military significance," the bombardments were nonetheless beginning to have a severe psychological impact on the residents of the city. Forced to live with the daily game of chance that dealt death from the sky, some of Saigon's residents unashamedly packed their family belongings and fled to the relative safety of the countryside. Newspapers ran ads offering prefabricated bomb shelters ranging in price from \$180 to \$250. And a number of influential South Vietnamese politicians publicly demanded that the United States resume its air strikes against the northern half of North Vietnam—and retaliate for each shell that fell on Saigon by dropping a bomb on the Communist capital of Hanoi.