

# Viet Riots Siphoned Off Base Guards

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SAIGON.

Security officials here long have believed Communist guerrillas could shell the U. S. air base on the outskirts of Saigon, as they did yesterday morning. But the political crisis here made easier their job—one of the worst attacks to date on an Allied air base.

"Security around the air base was relaxed because of the political situation," a high-ranking South Vietnamese security officer said yesterday. Some of the regular Vietnamese Army units which normally would have been patrolling the outer perimeter of the base, he said, were confined to barracks or assigned other responsibilities connected with the anti-government political demonstrations and turbulence.

Saigon's Tan Son Nhut Air Base—which is also the capital's civilian airport and one of the busiest in the world—lies three miles north of the center of the city. The hub of the airport is the control tower, and its backbone is the main jet-length runway, where business men land in commercial airliners only seconds after American jet fighters screech off the other end. The control tower was knocked out during the 2-minute, multi-million-dollar attack Wednesday.

The tower and main runway are secured by barbed wire fences and outposts, and by Vietnamese and American security forces.

The guerrillas, attacking with mortars and recoilless rifles, did not penetrate the inner defense perimeter.

Within the inner perimeter are based more than 10,000 American troops, most of them to give air support to the war against the Viet Cong. The American units are responsible for the security of their aircraft and helicopters, but their duties do not extend beyond the barbed-wire enclosure.

The second rim of defense—beyond the barbed wire—in times of political quiet would

be maintained and patrolled by one Vietnamese airborne battalion and one Vietnamese Army battalion, security sources said.

But since the onset of the Buddhist-inspired demonstrations and the turbulence designed to topple the Saigon government, the Vietnamese airborne battalion had not been permitted to patrol. Instead, it was ordered to remain in barracks in case it was needed to stop rioting, street fighting and stoning of Americans in Saigon.

The Vietnamese Army battalion during the crisis had been shifted from airport security to protecting Vietnamese government installations such as the government radio station, which pro-Buddhist students attempted to seize several weeks ago.

The elite paratroop battalion and the regular Army battalion were replaced with only one battalion of regional forces, which are not as well equipped, trained or paid as the regular units.

A third defense perimeter was to be secured by one Vietnamese Army battalion, one Ranger battalion and local

popular and regional forces under the command of the Tan Binh District, Gia Dinh Province. Gia Dinh is the doughnut-shaped province surrounding Saigon. The airport lies in this province, not within Saigon's city limits.

Because of the unrest in Saigon, elements of the Vietnamese Army battalion and the Ranger battalion were brought into Saigon to attempt to maintain order.

This left a smattering of local popular and regional para-military forces, plus small elements of the regular battalions to do the patrolling job. A total of 25 square miles is within the three perimeter rings.

"But you knew we did not have enough troops to cover all that ground all the time," a Vietnamese security officer said. "And the paramilitary units were a little lazy in patrolling anyway."

Between the second and third perimeters—1,000 to 5,000 yards from the airport control tower—the 15 to 30 Viet Cong guerrillas brought in at least two mortars and one recoilless rifle to bombard the air base.

They placed their base plates and mortar tubes near the village of Ba Queo, a peasant village of huts and a small market, surrounded by fruit groves and bushes.

Eight miles west of the village, towards Cambodia, lies Duc Hoa, the Viet Cong headquarters for units specializing in sabotage, demolition and small unit attacks. Duc Hoa is on the fringe of the Communist stronghold called the Plain of Reeds, a marshy wasteland that was under Communist control even during the French Indochina war.

Security officials estimated that in an 8-hour march, the Viet Cong could move divisions of troops from Cambodia to Saigon.

The specialized unit in Duc Hoa is commanded by a humpbacked man in his 40s,

security sources said. At the Saigon security headquarters his photo is posted—a 1,000,000 piastre (\$9,000) reward has been put up for his head.

Almost all the small villages around Saigon have been subjected to minor terrorism in recent weeks. Two or three policemen a night are killed or kidnaped from these villages. Police checkpoints and headquarters are regularly attacked—sometimes overrun—as the Communists have tightened their noose around the capital city.

"It would take hundreds of thousands of troops, shoulder to shoulder with garden rakes digging up the whole perimeter all the time, to prevent an attack like this," an American Air Force officer said. "The V. C. (Viet Cong) can put mortar tubes under any bush any time and we cannot even see them."