

Coups Are Old Hat to U.S. Saigon Families

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SAIGON.

In case of coup, reach for baseball bat.

That's the routine for Americans living here, says the young wife of a United States Army captain.

"Every one brings a baseball bat when they come here and chips a notch on it for

each crisis. Mine is about full."

The mother of three small children, she said her family had been here "three coups" — indicating she was an "old timer" who lived in Viet Nam since before last November when the Ngo Dinh Diem regime was toppled.

Of the latest coup, on Sept. 13, the captain's wife said: "Oh, this was just another

crisis. We just stayed home like always."

The number of coups here has become a standard unit of measure for American families — two coups means since January. Average tour is two years.

For example, Mrs. Joe Williams, wife of a Navy commander, has learned Viet Nam quickly. On Aug. 5— during the Tonkin Gulf crisis

—she and her husband were playing golf in Norfolk, Va., when informed they were being rushed to Viet Nam.

"I nearly fell off my golf cart," she gasped. Three weeks later, "still in a state of shock," she arrived in Viet Nam just as student demonstrators forced Prime Minister Maj. Gen. Nguyen Khanh to step down from office. Undaunted, she went

shopping the first day, returning to find her house had been on fire. Later, on a calm Sunday morning, she and husband Joe went to the radio station to telephone relatives in Tennessee. "A man came running upstairs and asked why all the troops were outside the gates." Her husband explained in Southern drawl: "The rebel troops had taken over, and we did not even know it. The guard made us sneak out the back alley to avoid them."

They taxied through a calm section of the city and "Mo," as Mrs. Williams is called—casually went shopping for earrings.

"When we heard troops had surrounded the airport, we knew she could not get to our home nearby," her husband explained calmly. "She went to friends and as she got out of the taxi the armored cars rolled by. That's when it really hit her."

Though not a shot was fired during the bloodless revolt, some American housewives complained they had been kept in the dark about the developments. With civilian telephones cut off, they were forced to rely on the American military radio station which warned Americans to keep off the streets and not to attempt breaking through any roadblocks. Even during the late evening hours, the radio station repeated the early morning rebel statements which wanted to arrest Premier Khanh. Many thought that the coup against Gen. Khanh had succeeded even though negotiations were later initiated. But the "oldtimers" took

the Sunday troop movements casually.

"I stopped at my jeweler to pick up my dangly earrings and the proprietor was stuffing all his gold in the safe and screaming it's another coup," the wife of a Navy lieutenant said. "Well, give me my earrings," she told him. "We might be evacuated." He kept screaming it's a coup and who could think about earrings. But she got them.

Even American teen-agers view Viet Nam with cloistered calmness. (Most American families live behind barbed-wire or bamboo fences sprinkled throughout the old French quarter.) When a grenade exploded down the block from one American home the 12-year-old son wrote grandmother, "Nothing much happens here. They just bombed the bar across the street, but only a couple of people got scratched." (His mother censored the letter.)

Despite casualness American families have received evacuation instructions and have been told to keep one evacuation kit packed.

One housewife has packed in her evacuation kit two silk brocade dresses. "The Com-mies can have my washed out cottons," she said. Nearby the door sits a brown attache case with "every letter my husband has written to me in ten years of marriage. I am not going to leave them behind."

She looked around her air-conditioned study and moaned, "but I have to leave my wedding pictures and my mother's sterling silver candelabra."