



## Saigon, 'the Pearl of the Far East'

Even after Manila, Saigon was a shocker; a stinking, noisy, unbelievably crowded and filthy city steaming under the morning sun. Thousands of unmuffled engines on cars, trucks, motorcycles and motorised rickshaws created a constant, ear-shattering roar as upright bikes wiggled daringly in and out. Thick smoke from the engines and countless rubbish fires cast a dense, acrid smog over the streets. As our bus thumped in starts and stops towards the downtown section, the stench of crowded humanity and rotting garbage accumulating at the open markets and stalls of the sidewalk vendors turned my stomach. To breathe in Saigon was to hurt.

The city was in decay. From what I'd read, Saigon had been a quiet, tree-lined, elegant city, known for years as 'the Pearl of the Far East'. I don't know what I'd expected, but this was no exquisite pearl! Obviously, Saigon had fallen from grace, condemned by ancient Vietnamese gods to choke on its own putrid excretions.

The military dominated the scene. Large numbers of South Vietnamese Army troops, the ARVN, were stationed at critical points throughout the city. In addition, grey-clad, armed national police closely controlled the flow of traffic and people at all major intersections. Soldiers of nations allied with South Vietnam – South Korea, Australia, the Philippines and the United States – wandered the streets and filled the shoddy bars.

Barbed wire enclosures, heavy cement ramparts and sandbags protected sensitive or exposed military and civilian compounds. Traffic was blocked off from certain key streets where a police or army post might be vulnerable to a hand-grenade thrown from a passing motorcycle or some other kind of attack from communist-led Viet Cong.

Within this squalid setting, throngs of civilians bustled and shoved to glean a frugal living or, as we soon learned, to attend to their respective, profitable trades as pimps, whores, black market operators or dope dealers. For the latter group, business was brisk as constantly increasing numbers of foreign troops and civilians flooded into the city. On this day, the 14 of us, fresh from rice production training in the Philippines, were added to the city's population.

'This is where you men will stay for a week or so until you receive your provincial assignments,' said George, an agricultural officer from the USAID Mission who had met us at the airport. The government bus had stopped outside the Eden Roc Hotel on the lower end of Tu Do Street in the

heart of the girlie-bar district. 'Except for the cockroaches that lick the glue off your stamps and move the furniture around while you sleep, it's not such a bad place, and there's plenty of action along the street for your recreation!' he said with an ugly leer. A couple of the guys looked like they could quite easily have gone straight back to the airport.