

Column 1

Saigon's elite still enjoying 'the good life'

*If Reds attack golf course,
'we'll just let them play thru'*

By Ronald Yates

Far East Correspondent

Chicago Tribune Press Service

SAIGON—North Vietnamese troops are near Saigon, the thump of artillery punctures the city's thick, sticky air, refugees hunker miserably under bamboo lean-tos, and they are playing tennis at the *Cercle Sportif Saigonnais*.

Sprawling over 30 acres in the heart of Saigon, the exclusive private club is the pinnacle for Saigon's elite—wealthy Vietnamese businessmen, French plantation owners, generals, politicians.

Here the gentry gather to sip gin and tonic at poolside and watch the scions of society sock tennis balls from behind the golden balustrades of the clubhouse veranda.

SOMEWHERE THERE is a war. Somewhere, but not at the *Cercle Sportif*.

Sleek, bronzed girls in bikinis strut back and forth at poolside sipping their *Citroen et soda*; several dozen Vietnamese laborers are laying a fresh coat of paint on the *Sportif's* 1920s vintage buildings, several French planters maneuver their coppery bodies to achieve maximum exposure from the blistering sun.

Not far away under that same sun, bodies of soldiers are rotting in rice fields and women who have never seen a bikini flee with their children from the incessant barrages of mortar fire.

It is the last days of Pompeii at the *Cercle Sportif*—the ashes from Mount Vesuvius are falling lightly onto the *Sportif's* brilliant red flame trees and the volcano is rumbling in the distance.

BUT THE good life must go on, albeit the conversation around poolside these days has acquired a certain gloomy urgency—how much one must pay to get an exit visa, [\$200] or if one is a moneyed Vietnamese, how much one must pay to get a valid passport. [\$3,000].

"Wouldn't it be grand," sniffs one matronly French woman, "if they would just declare Saigon a neutral city like Geneva and allow the war never to come here."

"That's silly," replies the woman's husband, a rubber plantation operator for 25 years. "What needs to be done is Hanoi must allow landowners to hang onto their property—let them take Saigon."

NOT FAR AWAY a girl screams as she is tossed into the blue-green water of the Olympic-sized pool and a small crowd shouts its

Continued on page 4, col. 1

Column 1

Saigon's elite still frolic

Continued from page one

approval of a fiercely contested badminton match.

Next door to the *Cercle Sportif*, guarded by flocks of M-60 tanks, clusters of antiaircraft guns, hundreds of airborne troops, and sundry armored cars, is the presidential palace—a recent target of a lone Vietnamese air force pilot's bombing attack.

When Lt. Nguyen Quang Trung—he has since been promoted to captain in the North Vietnamese air force—dropped two 500-pound bombs into the palace grounds last week from his F-5 fighter, the *Cercle Sportif* was sprinkled with bits of shrapnel. It was the closest the war has ever come to the club.

AS A RESULT some members have opted to spend their time at the *Cercle Hippique Saigonnais* or the *Club Nautique de Saigon*—both in safer areas of the city.

For Americans there are the remnants of various NCO and officers' clubs scattered about the city.

At the brink, a former bachelor officers' quarters during America's active participation in the war, defense attache office employes and retired military men who have elected to spend their pensions in Viet Nam, gather in the bar like parched geese, and refight obscure battles.

"LISTEN, WE LOST this war when we didn't bomb Hanoi off the map," snaps one 55-year-old former sergeant, his ample stomach engulfing the edge of the bar.

Jack Mabley is on vacation

"Should'a nuked 'em, back in '66," advises another retiree. "I said it then and I'm sayin' it now — we should'a nuked 'em."

At the end of the room a combo of Vietnamese musicians plays "I Could Have Danced All Night" on a violin, a piano, a guitar, and a bass fiddle.

And out at the defense attache office headquarters near Tan Son Nhut air base, three American advisers prepare for a round of golf at the 18-hole Dao course.

"IF THE Viet Cong come in while we are on the course, why we'll just let them play thru," guffaws one of the threesome.

Not far away, interspersed with the screech of jet engines as South Vietnamese air force planes take off on their sorties, the crash of bowling pins can be heard in the Dao bowling alley.

And along Saigon's Tu Do Street, hundreds of prostitutes, bar girls, and "mama-sans" display their wares to anybody who doesn't look like a beggar. Business has been bad for the girls of Tu Do Street since President Nguyen Van Thieu imposed a 9 p. m. curfew and banned soldiers from going into the bars.

"Saigon is a dying place," says one longtime resident. "But she is dying like a whore who is desperately trying to turn her last trick."