To a 10-year-old American child, Saigon in 1963 was both mystifying and terrifying

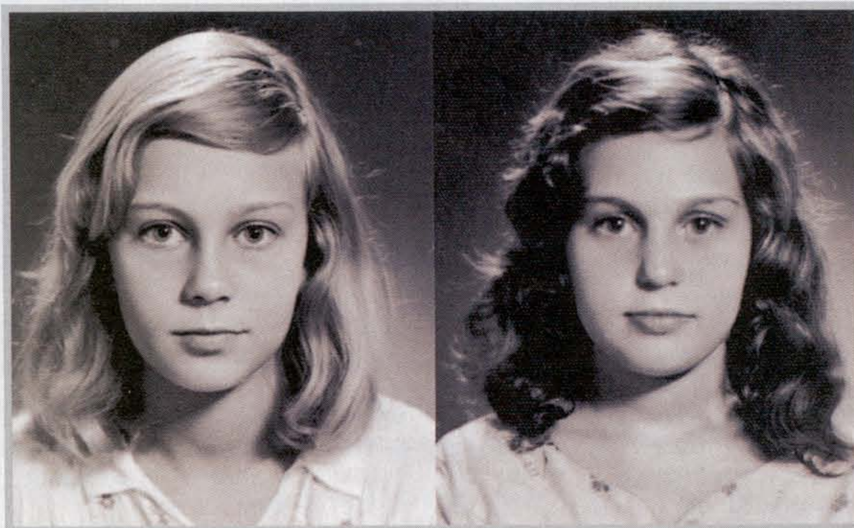
BY SALLY BUSH LYNCH

An angry mob blocked access to our street, so our school bus driver let my sister and me off a couple of blocks from our house. Candy and I, who were 8 and 10 respectively, grabbed hands and raced home through the uproar. Our laundress, Chibah, had opened the gate and climbed a tree to watch for us. The shouting, stone-throwing mob scared me, but no one paid any attention to us except a man who laughed as we rushed inside our gate. It was set in tall concrete walls topped with barbed wire, and we felt safe inside. My mother, Helen Arnold Bush, was watching on the balcony.

Our father, Henry C. Bush, came home from his job with the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and we all watched the riot from my bedroom balcony. Police charged the crowd and fired tear gas, driving people back. They melted into alleyways. Then a man in a pink shirt ran up, urging people on, and the crowd surged forward again.

"See that guy in the pink shirt? He's an agitator," explained Pa. Recently I wondered about that pink shirt. Was the man trained to wear something so distinctive? Was the melee spontaneous, or planned?

Our cook, Anh, brought a tray of lime slices to rub around our eyes, to encourage watering and rinse the tear gas away. They made the burning worse.



COURTESY OF SALLY BUSH LYNCH

As children of a U.S. Agency for International Development officer, author Sally Bush Lynch (left) and her sister, Candy, spent some unusual early years in Saigon.

We had moved to Saigon in 1963. It was no place for children, and moreover our time there was the beginning of the end of our parents' once-happy marriage. Even so, Candy and I managed to have fun.

We went to the American Community School, where spitballs flew in Madame Gautreau's French class. Four-fifths of our fellow students were American, and the rest were from Vietnam, China and all corners of the globe. Our handsome young teacher used his arm to demonstrate tonal levels as we chanted words in unison.

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A military policeman rode our school bus, automatic weapon at the ready. He never talked, and his eyes always moved, peering through the heavy metal screens installed to deflect grenades. American military personnel guarded our school 24 hours a day.

Candy and I always waited for the bus by a big heap of garbage in front of a Buddhist pagoda, right across the street from our "three-room wreck," as Ma called our duplex. The military police presence on the bus prevented misbehavior, and we sat still and sang songs like "Ninety-Nine Bottles of Beer on the Wall." Along the route, we picked up an American general's children who lived in a big house with armed guards in front.

I liked to sit on our balcony at dusk and watch the bats. One evening I heard a loud moan come from the pagoda across the street. I went to get my mother, and we watched as lights went on in a second-story room of the pagoda. A man sat in a chair, and other men talked to him.

An impressive-looking man, obviously in charge, paced around and watched the interrogation. They were all Vietnamese. This went on for half an hour, then the man in charge went out on his balcony.

Afraid he would see us, we slipped inside. Suddenly there was a high-pitched scream that ended abruptly, as if it were cut off.

Ma was afraid to call the Saigon police, who were known to Americans as "White Mice" for their timidity as well as for their white uniforms. She spoke to our next-door neighbor, Lt. Col. Robert Lutz, about the incident. He watched from our balcony as a limousine pulled up to the temple's gates, and a saffron-robed monk rushed out and opened the gate. Colonel Lutz agreed something was going on.

The Lutzes had a big house and children our ages, Bobbie and Janet. Saigon was too unsafe for us to wander around, and we seldom went out at night, even with adults. Pa and I once saw a man on a bike in a gritty alley, and Pa explained how bicyclists carried bombs. We were lucky to have a family next door, and sometimes other kids visited. We also visited some Chinese girls down the street who had a lawn big enough for races. I was very proud to beat a boy.

My mother took us to the *Cercle Sportif*'s big pool, which we loved. Built by the French, it had extensive grounds with tall trees. Remnants of France's influence also showed in Saigon's wide boulevards, and the Vietnamese women riding bicycles with long baguettes tied onto the baskets. Their hair, clasped midway, flowed to their knees.

In the fall of 1963 my parents talked about a coup, and Colonel Lutz called Pa, asking him if we could all stay with his family until he was able to come home. So we went next door, and a car with two Vietnamese drove up. They asked if we could hide them, and Pa put them and the car in the Lutz garage. We spent the night in the Lutzes' house, watching a sky red with tracer bullets and counting artillery round explosions.

One day during a calmer time, Ma tried to take us to the zoo, but we got no farther than the steps, where soldiers with guns barred the way. Later we learned that prisoners had been held in cells under the tiger cages.

Pretty, slender Vietnamese secretaries from Pa's office visited our home, and among them I met my future stepmother, Mai Phuong Thi. Eventually she and my father married and had a son, Joseph, shortly before Vietnam fell. Pa sponsored her big family in the United States.

My father's USAID chief, Gustav Hertz, disappeared, leaving a wife and four children. We heard rumors that he was captured by the Viet Cong.

Once, hoping for a break from the turmoil, we flew to Nha Trang for a seaside vacation. En route we could see a river snaking below us, and the pilot told us not to take any pictures. We reached our hotel and ran to the beach. Candy and I could see someone in the water. He floated close to shore, and then washed out to sea. We pointed him out to Ma, who could not swim. A crowd gathered, formed a human chain, and pulled to shore the stiff body of a Vietnamese man dressed in shorts. A young woman knelt by his side, crying.

Still determined to have a vacation, we flew to Bangkok to see old friends. Just before we returned to Saigon, the Viet Cong bombed the American community's movie theater, Kinh Do. We would have been there if not for our vacation. Three Americans were killed, and 50 were injured. In the lobby, Marine Captain Donald Edward Koelper saw a Viet Cong shoot and kill a military police officer. The captain confronted the VC, who pulled the fuse, dropped the bomb and fled. Koelper, realizing there was no time to evacuate the hundreds of Americans, ran into the theater and shouted, "Get down!"

COURTESY OF HENRY C. BUSH

Several "White Mice" (as Americans called the Saigon police) survey a Saigon street after Ngo Dinh Diem's assassination, in a photograph taken by the author's father.

Patrons dove under their seats. Seconds later the bomb exploded, killing Koelper and an Army officer. The bomb blew two steel doors between the lobby and the auditorium inward, injuring women and children in the back row. Koelper was posthumously promoted to major, and awarded the Navy Cross and Purple Heart. He was the first U.S. Marine to die in the Vietnam War; he and his fellow servicemen saved many lives that day, at the cost of their own.

Candy heard that the bombers had been disguised as janitors. My mother heard rumors that the White Mice had fled the street before the bombing. For 20 years, Candy dreamed she climbed the outside of the Kinh Do, which had grown to Empire State Building proportions. She had to reach the roof where a lemon tree grew, and if she could climb far enough and pick a lemon the bomb would not explode. She always woke up before she could reach that lemon. Candy's explanation is that lemons are shaped somewhat like grenades.

We did not have TV, so I read many Nancy Drew mysteries as well as books from my parents' big collection. In the afternoons Pa came home, made a Scotch on the rocks, put his feet up and listened to jazz. Years later when Vietnam had TV, Pa had me send him earplugs to block out his wife's Vietnamese soap operas.

I only heard my parents argue once, while Candy and I hid in our room and wondered about a divorce. "What do you want me to do, quit my job?" Pa yelled out.

He eventually did quit USAID, and worked on a Control Data Corp. team designing, implementing and evaluating a land reform program, "Land to the Tiller," in which the American government paid landlords to sell their land to the tenant farmers. He was proud of his work, although he said the program worked better in the Mekong Delta than elsewhere. One day, very upset, Pa told me President John F. Kennedy was dead.

In February 1965, President Lyndon Johnson ordered all American dependents home. Candy and I brought home our report cards. Ma packed, and we waited in lines. An African-American woman told Ma she was worried about the racial problems back home, a step back from Saigon's integrated school and workplaces.

We flew to Hawaii, and only missed four days of school. Our Saigon school was converted to a hospital.

After the Hawaiian school year ended, we moved to Bangkok, joining other American dependents with relatives in Vietnam. Two years later, my parents divorced, and my mother, my sister and I moved to Denver, Colo. After Vietnam fell, my father retired nearby and we saw him regularly. My mother became a computer programmer.

Mai Phuong was a model stepmother, and best of all, we had a brother, Joe. A few years ago, Candy, my three children and I went to his and Laura's big wedding. Mai Phuong, at 70, looked lovely in an *ao dai*, Vietnam's long, silken dress. Pa's Vietnamese relatives spoke in tribute to their late sponsor, and the DJ played music by Pa's favorite, Louis Armstrong. ☆