

Attack on Embassy

DONALD C. JOHNSON

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APRIL 7 ATTACK ON EMBASSY - ONE OFFICER'S VIEW

This record is being written on April 9th to record the events of April 7th while they are still reasonably fresh.

I left the Embassy shortly before 7 o'clock, heading for the house of the Deputy Chief of Mission. I drove my car down to the corner of Avenida La Paz where it inexplicably stalled. I went back and got the duty driver to help me push it across La Paz onto the sidewalk and there we tried without success to get it started again. After trying for about 15 minutes, we were about to give up when one of the FUSEP guards came up and said excitedly that "ya vienen los civiles". I didn't understand what he meant by "los civiles" until I looked down La Paz toward the center of town and saw a large group of people moving up the street towards the Embassy. When I first saw them they were one block away.

I immediately returned to the Embassy, entering through the side gate. At that time the two Marines on duty were already scrambling to get into their reaction mode. The front gate of the Embassy had already been closed at the end of the business day and the Marines were busy breaking out their riot control equipment and notifying Security that they had a demonstration on their hands.

This was about 7:30 in the evening (most of the times used in this record are approximate, but there are some cases where I remember looking at the clock while something was going on). From the telephone on the wall across from the Marine desk, I called the DCM to let him know that a demonstration was starting. He instructed me to check with Sy DeWitt to see if he had called for assistance from the FUSEP.

Sy arrived at about this point. He immediately took command at Marine Post I and told me that he had already contacted FUSEP with a request for assistance. In order to observe what was going on down on the street, I requested Marine Sergeant Speidell to open the Ambassador's office for me. From that location I monitored the demonstration off and on for the next two hours.

I also contacted the Ambassador to inform him what was going on. He asked whether we had been in touch with the Public Security Forces, and I told him that Sy had already made a request for police assistance.

For about the first 15 or 20 minutes after the demonstration began, the tone of the demonstration was not particularly threatening. The students were relatively orderly, they chanted slogans like "el pueblo unido jamas sera vencido", "Matta si, gringos no" and "Yankees basura". One group sang the Honduran National Anthem in front of the Chancery. There was some isolated rock throwing.

It seems to me that the psychology of the crowd shifted dramatically around 8 o'clock. This shift coincided with the burning of the first vehicles (my stalled 1972 Opel GT sports car was among the first victims, if not the very first one). Shortly after 8 o'clock I got a call from my wife telling me that Judy Rodriguez had called to say that she had heard an on-the-scene radio report that my car was on fire. I could not see my car burning but I could see reflected flames from the annex across the street.

In my opinion it was the demonstrators' success in burning these vehicles without provoking any police response that led to the full-fledged attack on the annex. There were a few half-hearted efforts to bang on the door of the Chancery, and some of the students tried to place burning tires against our front gate, but they were unable to get any fire going and they quickly gave up any effort to penetrate the Chancery's main gate. However, on repeated occasions students tried to smash the recessed lights along the outer perimeter of the Chancery wall. I watched them use sticks, rocks, bricks, and various other things in a pointless and largely unsuccessful effort to put the lights out.

All this time Sy was continuing in his efforts to get help. About 8:20 p.m. the attack picked up steam. A barrage of rocks was thrown at the annex and the Chancery parking lot (where the Ambassador parks his vehicle). We could hear the sound of glass being smashed in the annex and shortly afterwards saw the flames of the wooden guard shacks that were set on fire by the students.

Once the students had burned the guard shacks they began to concentrate their efforts on the AID building and on the small guard house that leads to the Consulate. The students massed in front of the iron grille of the AID building and pounded it until they finally forced it open. The Marines and Sy were in radio contact with Gene Szepezy, who had taken refuge in the annex's safehaven, along with several members of the Honduran car force.

offices and we were crying and sneezing for the rest of the evening.

Shortly before 9:00 p.m., I spoke with the Ambassador to tell him about the situation. He said he had been unable to reach either the President or the General up to that point. He asked whether I had called the State Department Operations Center, and I told him I would do so immediately. I got through to the Op Center almost at exactly 9 o'clock (I was sitting in Political making the call and happened to look at the clock at that particular time). I spoke to Steve Mann and briefed him on the situation. The Op Center patched me through to DAS Walker and Assistant Secretary Abrams. I told them of the situation, and Abrams ordered me to call JTF-Bravo and asked for helicopter support for the possible rescue of the people in the AID building.

I told the Op Center that I would call again shortly after 9:30 to report whether we had gotten police assistance. I radioed to the Ambassador the instructions I had gotten from Abrams; the Ambassador said that this was already being worked on and that helicopters were being scrambled at Palmerola.

By this time there was no doubt that the AID building had been penetrated. We were getting reports by phone that flames could be seen coming from one of the floors of the building. (Apparently at the same time the Consular Section was being torched at the same time, but we could not see anything from where we were. There was smoke billowing around but we could not see flames coming from the Consular Section. Likewise, it was impossible to see the damage that was being done to the cars behind the annex building.)

Shortly after 9:30 I called back to the Operations Center to tell them that the police and firemen had not yet arrived, but were on their way to the Embassy. I passed this information to Walker and Abrams. Shortly before this conversation, I was at Post I, and one of the American Halifax supervisors told me that they had been fired upon from one of the corners of the Chancery complex over by the old "cueva" area and had returned fire with their shotguns. I asked them what kind of weapons were being fired at them and he replied shotguns and .38 caliber pistols.

The only riot control action taken by the Marines throughout this entire episode was the launching of a tear gas canister sometime around 8:15 to 8:30. The gas seeped into the Political Section offices and various other offices and we were crying and sneezing for the rest of the evening.

The arrival of the firemen and the police at about 9:45 allowed us to open the front gate of the Embassy and go looking for Szepezy. Sy first sent his investigator to scout out the area and make contact with FUSEP. When he radioed that he had made contact with the police (we were concerned that the police might fire on us if they saw people coming out of the Embassy armed), we went to open the front gate. Jackie Kassenger, Sgt. Speidell, an American Halifax supervisor, and I opened the gate. Jackie and Sgt. Speidell and the Halifax man then crossed the street to look for Gene. I remained at the gate to keep watch and to radio as soon as we saw Gene come out. He emerged a couple of minutes later and went up to Post I. I radioed that he was safe and asked that the message be passed to his wife. Cris Orozco radioed back that he had heard my transmission and that Mrs. Szepezy, who was at his house, had been informed.

I then went across the street to join the other three. We went up to the 6th floor (throughout all of this I thought it was the 5th floor) where there was a fire burning in one of the offices. We got fire extinguishers off the walls in front of the elevator landings, and with Jackie leading the way we sprayed the fires with the extinguishers. We managed to put out the fire that was in the closest office, but the fire in the next office was burning too hot for us to get close.

We used 5 or 6 canisters of chemical fire extinguisher on the fire, and then couldn't find any more. Throughout this period only one Honduran fireman entered the area. He did nothing, and left right behind Jackie and me when we were forced out by the smoke. Looking at it in retrospect, I must have looked fairly strange fighting a fire wearing suit pants and a tie.

We also looked through as much of the building as we could. The smoke coming from the floors below the La Paz Avenue entrance was too intense for us to get down there, but we did check out all the other floors. We found no demonstrators inside the building, and confirmed that the fire above the La Paz Avenue entrance was confined to only the two offices of the 6th floor, and did not appear to be spreading.

The four of us who were in the building kept together throughout the entire time, because we were worried that one of us might be overcome by the smoke and would not be able to get out unless there was a buddy system. After

what seemed like maybe 15 or 20 minutes, but was probably less, we were forced to leave the building because of the intense smoke. During the time we were in the building, I periodically radioed to Marine Post I to tell Sy where we were and what we were seeing and doing.

When we came out onto the La Paz Avenue entrance, we could see 5 or 6 journalists waiting on the sidewalk. Journalists had been in the area throughout the evening, judging from the number of flash bulb flashes that we could see from inside the Chancery. The journalists were on hand when Gene came out of the building as well. They did not ask us for any comment, and we didn't make any.

I then went back to Post I checked in with Sy, who told me that the Ambassador was on his way. Members of the Embassy guard force were sent over to the Embassy annex to guard the entrance, and other guards were set to work opening up the side gate of the Chancery. It was stuck shut, and took a few minutes to get it open, but was open by the time the Ambassador arrived at about 10:30 or 10:40. The Ambassador inspected the Chancery and immediately went to a meeting with the Country Team in the JAO conference room. The rest of the evening's events have been well documented.

Drafted by: Donald C. Johnson

4/9/88

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AMEMBASSY GUATEMALA

AMEMBASSY MANAGUA

AMEMBASSY PANAMA

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 TEGUCIGALPA 25858

E.O. 12356: DECL: OADR

TAGS: PTER, PREL, ASEC, HO

SUBJECT: APRIL 7 ATTACK ON EMBASSY - ONE OFFICER'S VIEW

1. CONFIDENTIAL - ENTIRE TEXT.

2. THIS REPORT WAS DRAFTED AS A MEMO TO THE AMBASSADOR ON APRIL 9TH TO RECORD IMPRESSIONS OF THE APRIL 7TH ATTACK ON THE U.S. EMBASSY WHILE THEY WERE STILL REASONABLY FRESH. IT WAS PREPARED BY POLCOUNS DON JOHNSON.

3. I LEFT THE EMBASSY SHORTLY BEFORE 1900 HOURS,

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HEADING FOR THE DCM'S RESIDENCE. I DROVE MY CAR DOWN TO THE CORNER OF AVENIDA LA PAZ WHERE IT INEXPLICABLY STALLED. I WENT BACK AND GOT THE DUTY DRIVER TO HELP ME PUSH IT ACROSS LA PAZ ONTO THE SIDEWALK AND THERE WE TRIED WITHOUT SUCCESS TO GET IT STARTED AGAIN. AFTER TRYING FOR ABOUT 15 MINUTES, WE WERE ABOUT TO GIVE UP

WHEN ONE OF THE FUSEP GUARDS CAME UP AND SAID EXITEDLY THAT "YA VIENEN LOS CIVILES". I DIDN'T UNDERSTAND WHAT HE MEANT BY "LOS CIVILES" UNTIL I LOOKED DOWN LA PAZ TOWARD THE CENTER OF TOWN AND SAW A LARGE GROUP OF PEOPLE MOVING UP THE STREET TOWARDS THE EMBASSY. WHEN I FIRST SAW THEM THEY WERE ONE BLOCK AWAY.

4. I IMMEDIATELY RETURNED TO THE EMBASSY, ENTERING THROUGH THE SIDE GATE. AT THAT TIME THE TWO MARINES ON DUTY WERE ALREADY SCRAMBLING TO GET INTO THEIR REACTION

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United States Department of State

Washington, D.C. 20520

MAY 8 1989

Case Control No. 8901553

Ambassador Everett Ellis Briggs
c/o ARA/CEN
Room 4909
Department of State
Washington, D. C. 20520

Dear Ambassador Briggs:

I refer to your telegram Tegucigalpa 5658 of April 4, 1989, in which you requested the declassification of telegram 88 Tegucigalpa 5858 containing a chronology of the events of April 7, 1988, when the Embassy was attacked.

After careful review, we have determined that the document may be downgraded to unclassified.

Sincerely,

H. Eugene Bovis
Acting Director
Classification/Declassification Center
Bureau of Administration and
Information Management

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