

“THE NIGHT THE SKY FELL DOWN”

The following stories are excerpted from the book, *JIS: The First Fifty Years*, compiled and edited by Jane James, a JIS teacher and parent, and produced by Will Woodruff, Publications Director. Published for the 50th anniversary celebrations in 2002, the book is available at the alumni office via Beth Owen (769 2555 ext. 72903 or bowen@jisedu.or.id).

“We could see a large fireball in the sky in the general direction of the school,” recalls Mr. Magill, a high school teacher. Mrs. Schuster, a teacher at PIE, remembers seeing people “aimlessly walking with mattresses on their heads.” Mrs. Stamp, a high-school math teacher, said, “We could not feel the heat, but the crackling was beginning to turn into loud and frightening explosions. Then the whistling and whizzing started and we suddenly realized that the objects causing the strange loud, squeaky, whining, whirling sounds were passing right over our heads. It certainly sounded just the same as films that I had seen of “life in the trenches” during the First World War.” What people may have thought during the chaos, was this is the beginning of the third.

But it was not a war, nor a simple accident, it was a catastrophe lived through by many a teacher, student, expat and Indonesian, alike. An ammunition dump, in the residential area of Cilandak, South Jakarta, had ignited with horrendous results. People remember it as “the night the sky fell down,” as stated in the Jakarta Post (Wednesday, October 31, 1984). “The next day The Jakarta Post told us exactly what had happened and we were relieved to know that it was not the beginning of a revolution. “It could have been a lot worse,” said one bystander.

Why was ammunition stored in a residential area? This was brought up in a Jakarta Post article entitled, “The Price of Carelessness,” along with other questions of a similar nature. “Indonesians are known to be by nature an easy-going people” said the Post. “But if it is true that carelessness is at the base of so much calamity, then we have to do something about it.”

The only statement that comes close to an answer is given by Mrs. Stamp, “The human animal never really learns.”

—Mike “Max” Vondras, Class of 2003

“On Monday, October 30, 1984, all of us living in the Cilandak and Pondok Indah area experienced a night of sheer terror. All of a sudden, the sound of distant firecrackers, a rather common sound on a typical evening in Jakarta, became loud enough for us to take notice,” Liz Stamp, a math teacher, recalls. “The night the ammunition dump exploded we’d just been visiting our neighbors in Cilandak when, walking home, we saw, on the horizon, what looked like an enormous bonfire. We stood for a while and wondered what event was being celebrated.

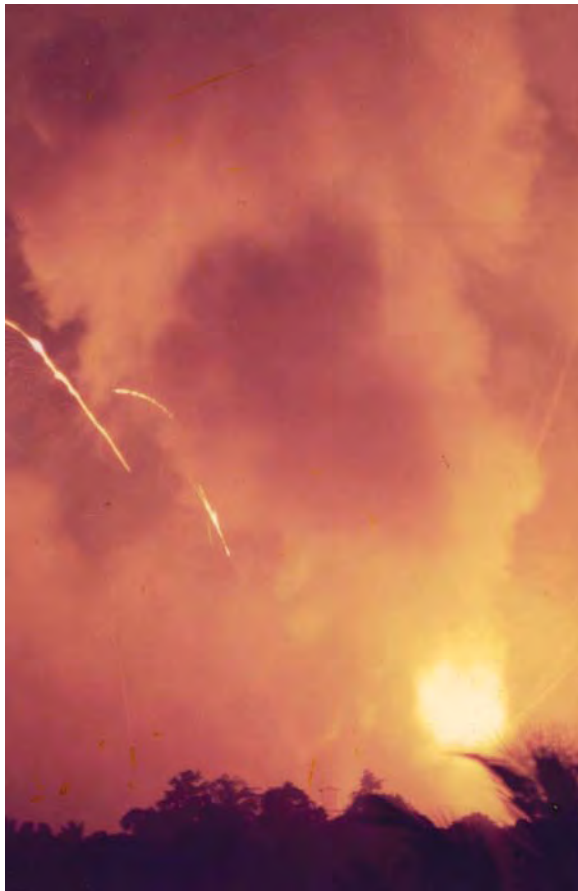
“Soon many of us stood in the road with our homes behind us and the fire before us growing bigger, taller and hotter as the flames reached for the sky. There were also what seemed to be fireworks streaking out of the heart of the red and yellow ball of crackling and dancing color. We could not feel the heat, but the crackling was beginning to turn into loud and frightening explosions.

“Then the whistling and whizzing started and we suddenly realized that the objects causing the strange loud, squeaky, whining, whirling sounds were passing right over our heads. We could not quite see them, but they were certainly zooming pass

us in the darkness of the night, illuminated by the deep and powerful glow of what was, by now, a huge blazing inferno.

“We had no idea what was happening and all headed indoors. Once inside we filled the bath full of water and opened all the windows. We had lived through civil unrest in El Salvador and knew that these were sensible things to do if explosions were in the air and electricity might be cut off.

“We still did not know what the problem was but it was getting a lot worse. The “things” that were screaming and screeching through the air were ending their journeys with loud bangs.



“We stood for a while and wondered what event was being celebrated,” recalled Liz Stamp.

"Inside the house I was scared stiff, making sure that we had candles everywhere although the electricity and the phone were all working perfectly. I think we spoke to people on the phone but we did not really know exactly what had or was happening. I feared the worse and was sure that these shells that were flying past were going to finish us off.

"I sat on the floor, putting as many walls as possible between myself and the source of the fear - the shells. I was shaking like a leaf and the box of matches that I held in my hand was, I later realized, completely crushed! My husband Mike, meanwhile, watched a video! It seems that he thought that the shell cases were empty and he was not too worried.

"Later, when we had not been blown to smithereens, we went to bed. We were lucky in all ways, as there were many nearer to the blaze who lost their homes, and quite a few lost their lives. Where we were people had shell cases land on their roofs and in our house the blasts had caused part of our ceiling to collapse. The noise, smoke, and smell of burning really were quite dreadful.

"The next day the Jakarta Post told us exactly what had happened and we were relieved to know that it was not the beginning of a revolution. However, the remaining ammunition was to be detonated in a controlled fashion and while we were at school our servants were asked to vacate our home. They refused but, once we returned home, we told them to go to their friends and families as they were very scared and confused.

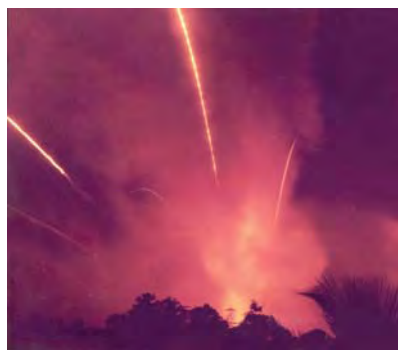
"But all is well that ends well and it could have been a lot worse."

Beata Mirecka-Jakubowska, an ESOL teacher also recalls the long night of terror. "As the thunder of explosions grew louder and nearer, I decided to investigate from a better vantage point. I climbed up to the roof of our house and stood in awe of the bright orange sky with streaks of bright yellow light shooting up from behind the rooftops. I first saw a huge explosion and then felt the

impact of hot air hitting me like a sledgehammer. If it hadn't been for a thin edge of the neighbor's garden wall behind me, I would have been swept off the roof like a feather. I heard my back crack painfully against the jutting bricks and on wobbly legs I climbed back down, screaming to the rest of the family to get out of the house. Luckily, the sliding terrace doors had been left open, so nobody was hit by glass from shattered windows, as was the case in most houses on our street. We had no idea what was going on - and watching the tide of local people streaming down the street from the direction of the fire didn't answer any questions. We were bewildered, like many other expatriates."

Laura Schuster, a PE teacher at the Elementary School, remembers... "I roomed with Roseanna Miranda at that time and she was out, so I brought the household help and her family, and grabbed cans of tuna fish, some water, bread, bananas and my passport into the furthest back room. This was before handphones so our outside contact was limited. Many people were aimlessly walking with mattresses on their heads - traveling to who knows wherever they perceived might be a safer haven. "Hearing the high-pitched screech of flying ammunition, we decided to follow the flow of the locals and flee our area.

"It wasn't until a few days later that I discovered what had happened and even then it was all rather grey. Not having been in Indonesia for any length of time, I had no history to compare it with and figured this was one of the 'experiences' I was told about when moving to an international scene."



"We could see a large fireball in the sky in the general direction of the school," recalled Gene Magill.

Gene Magill, a high school teacher, recalls his experience: "Living in Pondok Indah, I had just gone to bed when I heard loud noises from the room above me. I went upstairs to see what was going on and my housemate, Jim Herbert, walked out of his room and asked "What are you doing down there?" Curiosity led us outside, where we could see a large fireball in the sky in the general direction of the school. Jim exclaimed, "I must have left some chemicals out!" We both thought the school was on fire. We soon found the truth as refugees from Cilandak came knocking on our door to escape the inferno. "We spent most of the night sitting white-faced around the dining table, and occasionally ducking under it when the eerie screech of a flying shell seemed to be coming in our direction. It turned out that the shells were actually falling down in the Pondok Indah area! Thankfully, they mostly landed with an empty thud, but damage was substantial when the shells dropped onto buildings.

"The next day we still knew very little, and it wasn't until the papers arrived that we saw the headlines and learned that it was ammunition from the Marines depot in Cilandak that had somehow ignited. None of us living in South Jakarta in 1984 will ever forget the night the sky fell down."

"Hearing the high-pitched screech of flying ammunition, we decided to flee our area," said Laura Schuster.