

Sturkey, Dec. 26
Bontum

Dean Ames, David,

Curt, Jill & Chris -

What excellent gifts & wrapppers of
Christmas presents you all are - a thoughtful
& much appreciated selection. In particular
the Ut. Life calendar which I had requested
but failed to get from my family was a
stroke of genius: it's now at the hospital
where the Montagnards are fascinated by
scenes of Vermont which I take great
pleasure in showing them. Many thanks
for all your contributions to my Christmas -
they are grand.

I enclose a rather spotty selection
of snapshots in partial answer to your
questions. Unfortunately the best of the
lot have already gone home. Unfortunately,
too, I can no longer see this place
objectively & give you detached answers.
The other day the chief (Madagascar) pilots
from Planku gave me a chopper ride over
to the tri-border area (Laos, Cambodia,
Vietnam), over dramatic mountains,
deep gorges with white rushing rivers

gleaming in the shadows, occasional isolated clearings with thatched huts (and by what accommodation with the jungle & the U.C. do people live there?) - beautiful country all in that sunset light that etches shadows & stretches out the land. The chatter was noisy & one was isolated in the noise: it crossed my mind to ask the boys if they got homesick flying. But before I could ask I had a sudden vision of all the awful American anxieties: pollution, crime, race, education, politics, personal relationships, economics & (somehow oddly) Vietnam. Strange but true, & most intriguing: I'm in a corrupt, polluted, crime-ridden, war-torn country & feeling more personally free than I can recall feeling in years, if ever. Since then I've talked about this to two or three of the staff here & the response is invariably positive: yes, exactly, no too! I remember on one of my first evenings here sitting watching the sunset with another nurse.

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"Oh, isn't it beautiful," she cried & I was utterly baffled. Over weedy, uncult lawn full of beer cans, the untidy landlopper, the junk by the roadside, the jumbled houses, dirty children, emaciated dogs, strange hills, threatening, klondike (the C.C.C. outpost in the mountains) in the middle of the view, the sky angry & red - how could she think this beautiful? But I, too, now think those sunsets lovely.

Well, what facts can I give you.

The hospital is essentially three buildings, an inverted "U" ~~sh~~ facing the street. It was part of the orphanage originally but Port acquired it in 1968 after the old hospital (4-5 kilometers outside of town) was hit by the U.C. We hope to move back this dry season, but U.C. activity has increased just since I've been here & we may not be able to go. At present we have no running water (we haul tanks from the river), half-time electricity (mostly supplied by the generator for our X-ray machine) & minimal plumbing. The majority of the patients feel free to simply step to one side of the path & I hate to tell you where

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the bedpans get dumped! We have beds for 88 patients plus a dozen bassinets. However our census is always higher: at Christmas 165. They sleep two to a bed, on the floor, or out in tents. The routines are simple: Temps at 8-2-8 (the clocks don't run, so no pulses or respirations & B/P's only on the very sick. Meds: QID-8, BID-8 & 6, TID-8, 12 & 6, QID-8, 12, 6, 10, Q6H 6, 12, 6, 12. No other hours except in very rare cases. Rounds in the morning (every patient is seen), clinic (100-175) in the afternoon. X-ray handles routine stuff plus IVP's, barium enemas, UGI's. The lab can do CBC, maloniac Smacon, Gram stain, AEB, BUN, icterus index, Alk Phos, platelets, RBC morphology & we are starting C.E.'s. No electrolytes as yet. Nursing skills are varied. Hideo, the epiden boy of Minn Quay, sutures, does I & O's, pulls teeth, scrubs in the O.R., stents I.V.'s, gives meds. At the other end of the scale is Beh. Beh takes temperatures & doesn't do that very well. Most of the nurses & several aides deliver & can catheterize, one

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of the nurse gives anesthesia (ether - how I hate it), are circulated. Almost all the training has been done on the job. The hours are 7-7 (two shifts) with one day off a week: one nurse & an aide cover the long lunch hour from 12-3 & at night the staff (3 nurses & an aide) can sleep but are expected to do so in shifts. Our nurses & some of our aides can read & write Bahman, some speak Vietnamese, many have other Montagnard dialects. Two of the older nurses speak French, Hieu speaks excellent English & several others can manage simple English phrases.

By & know both staff & patients live in villages, clusters of houses elevated on stilts with bamboo or clay walls, thatch or (in the resettlement villages) tin roofs. A village may be 300-2000 people & the leader is the village chief. Inside the houses you usually find a lot of people, a charcoal fire, a few pots, some baskets, a mat to sleep on. That's it. No chairs, tables, beds, no electricity, no water, no screens, no extra clothes. In front of each house there is a log set on end, slightly hollow. Each evening the women

pound the rice on these logs with great poles of wood, shelling it for the evening meal. Rice is the staple food: in Bahrnan there are three words for rice, one for all other food. A wealthy man may have chickens or water buffalo or cows (real affluence) but most people depend on the rice harvest.

Most of the villages in our area are ① Bahrnan & ② Catholic (the French priests have been here since the 19th century), but elsewhere one finds the "pagans," animists with a whole pantheon of spirits & a belief in sacrifice. Our patients are occasionally taken home AMA to give the spirits a chance when the family feels modern medicine ~~has~~ has failed, and I know of at least one instance of a sacrifice (chicken) being offered for a patient with Ca. The traditional sacrificial animal is the water buffalo & the sacrifice itself is as brutal & prolonged an affair as one can imagine: evidently the spirits can be wrathful & hard to appease. The social unit of the village appears to retain pretty much the same character from tribe to tribe although I gather the spirits & certain customs vary. The tribes themselves

are at first indistinguishable, but one grows to recognize the rather passive Szekely, the tough & wiry Jancsi, the lively & irrepressible Reengere (sp?), the level-headed Bohman. These are immense tribes & I am only just beginning to see them as individual groups.

What else can I tell you. The war?

The roads close at 7pm - connected wire across the bridge. Everyone has a gun & uses it indiscriminately. We have outposts once or twice a week, incoming about once a month, so far no closer than the airport. The U.C. are much in evidence. However none of this seems terribly important in the face of day to day work - so many patients, such lovely people, so much to do. It's an occasional twinge in the background.

Time for a quick trip to MACU for the mail & then I am going to fold with a book (? Mr. Popper's Penguins, perhaps). Again, many thanks for the Christmas contributions, my best to your cell, & apologize for such an egocentric letter, but you got me going on a pet subject! As ever - literary