

*Letter from Dr. Thomas Hoskins.
Quaker Service, Da Nang*

May 5, 1975



5 May 1975

A Report directly from Da Nang written by Dr. Thomas Hoskins, Quaker Service

A Month in Liberated Da Nang: From Easter Sunday to May Day 1975

I. A view of Da Nang

Da Nang, prior to this month, could never appeal to my tastes or excite my emotions. Yet today the city seems a very different place. Last Sunday I joined the other stroller along the banks of the River Han. I relaxed in a deck chair and nursed iced coconut milk in the shade of a palm tree. The water reflected the morning sun and I watched the large freighters bearing the Liberation flag unload sacks of rice at the pier. The air was clear and carried the shrill cries and laughter of the women rowing ferry boats back and forth. Small boys stripped down and romped into the water chasing scurrying sea creatures along the river edge. Behind me, on Bach-Dang street, I heard conversations, footsteps, bicycles, a few motorcycles and occasionally a huge truck carrying the rice to the distribution centers in town. Da Nang was quiet and relaxed.

Da Nang was known by Saigon's tourist bureaus as the second largest city in South Vietnam, that is, south of the Provisional Demarcation line at the 17th parallel. And the "loss" of Da Nang was seen by Saigon as an ominous indication of the pending "loss" of all of southern Vietnam. The citizens of central Vietnam say to a visitor, however, that Da Nang is only large in the degree to which it has been spoiled by the war and the Americans. The American military, and the establishments that accompanied it, turned this seaport town into a supply dump. And in the category of overpopulated supply dumps Da Nang could truthfully be said to be second only to that other Americanized city - Saigon. Indeed, the citizens of central Vietnam go on to say, Da Nang is poorer than most other Vietnamese towns and areas, notably Hue, in the true wealth of Vietnam: art, song, dance, poetry, architecture, and the history of the struggle for independence.

Previously this was a town overcrowded with refugees, beggars, prostitutes, small bars, and cheap hotels. These catered to the American occupation forces and their followers: the numerous American Embassy staffers, CIA agents, military advisors, aircraft maintenance men, contractors, engineers and a host of fellow Yanks -- social workers, medical technicians and even some ministers. Today the refugees have returned to their homes, the beggars are fed, the prostitutes are not to be seen, and the bars and hotels have become tea houses and legitimate places of rest. And the Americans are gone.

The "loss" of Da Nang has not been a loss in significant ways. Rather it has been a deliverance from foreign intervention and from dependence on foreign military requirements. In becoming independent of the American government, Da Nang and her citizens are now free to enjoy and create a culture and society that is wholly Vietnamese.

II. The Liberation of Da Nang

The Year of the Cat has brought a dizzying series of political changes to Vietnam. The Americans and Thieu lost what influence they had in two months. From Ban-Me-Thuot to Saigon took only eight weeks!

Ban Me Thuot changed hands, then within ten days Kontum, Pleiku, Hue, Tam Ky and Quang Ngai. Small wonder that I left Saigon for Da Nang with a sense of urgency. Would I get to Central Vietnam before it changed hands? I had fears that if the plane took off at all, it might not land in Da Nang and I would lose my chance to work in that area.

Tan Son Nhut airport on the morning of March 27 was a crush of people awaiting airplanes. This prompted two BBC reporters I was with to belittle the rumors that a mass exodus was taking place from Da Nang. Certainly the planes going south were packed, but look at the people apparently waiting to get on the plane going north! And we got onto the 300 passenger airliner but there were only eight of us. Suddenly the rumors appeared to have more substance.

We were able to land in Da Nang, and not twenty-four hours too soon. The last planes between Saigon and Da Nang flew on the next morning, the 28th. The last planes before Saigon came under PRG control, that is. And Da Nang airport was thronged with those who could buy tickets for a ride to Saigon. The usual for a one-way ticket was \$16,000 southern piasters (\$23) and on this morning the going rate was \$400,000 (\$571).

I was the sole occupant of the Air-Vietnam bus into the city. The streets were crowded with people milling toward the airport and toward the wharf seeking transport to somewhere else. Many people carried everything they had with them. The poor carried rice and bundles of clothes. The rich carried portable television sets, radios, tape recorders, and fans - an eloquent commentary on the values that materialism leads people to.

Many hundreds of thousands of refugees crammed into the city. They were fleeing from fear, including fear of reprisal bombing. After Phuoc Long and Ban Me Thuot were abandoned Thieu's planes bombed great portions of the cities. The citizens of Pleiku, Kontum, Hue, Tam Ky, and Quang Ngai feared the same. People fled before anticipated warfare. But the war never came.

The changeover of Da Nang was peaceful. Just before, on the 27th and 28th of March, however, there was fear, anarchy, looting and shooting in the streets. The police left their posts and abandoned any effort to maintain the appearance of order. The remnants of Thieu's army ranged up and down the city streets discharging their M-16's at any available target. Later I was to meet several hundred people in the hospital wounded by the guns and grenades of route ARVN soldiers. As one Vietnamese said in broken English: "The streets are the Wild West." How true: different gangs of ARVN soldiers were shooting it out with each other from one street corner to the next.

I had expected to be in the middle of a siege, of a battle between two armies. Da Nang was nothing of the sort. It was in the midst of a collapse. The American-Thieu superstructure of control was only held together by money and the desire for more. With the loss of the American dollar, the intrinsic emptiness of the

structure was obvious to all. The "hearts and minds" of the people that were supposed to be the basis of the structure were never part of it. The structure of the military dictatorship collapsed of its own dead weight.

On the day before Da Nang changed hands, I talked with a 45 year old Army medic who had served with Diem's and Thieu's armies. Tears covered his face as he talked about what was happening. He had made war on the side of the Americans, Diem, and Thieu for twenty years. He had not had a normal family life, been able to farm or to study as he might have. And what was the just cause, the righteous cause? Which side followed the just cause? Once he had believed in what he was doing, he said. But he knew now that the side he fought with did not have the righteous cause. He wept about the error of his past, and the futility of his future. A stranger counseled him that as a medic he was a man of skill - he could care for the wounded and treat the sick. Surely his future would depend on his actions, on how he served the people with his skill. He need not worry, he was told, his good work would be needed to further the righteous cause.

The Day of Liberation itself, the 29th of March, 1975, began like the two previous days. Rifle fire everywhere. This was not warfare between the two sides, this was internecine skirmishes among ARVN soldiers or between ARVN soldiers and unarmed civilians. The Liberation Front had fired between thirty and forty rockets into military compounds the night before, but that was the only offensive effort made on the city itself.

I had been invited by the Alliance for National Reconciliation of the United Buddhist Pagoda of Vietnam to stay at the Da Nang Pagoda and do medical work with them. On Saturday the 29th they asked me to go with them to the city hospitals and begin work. So we careened through the streets in a jeep, dodging the panicked people and stray bullets. I pulled my pith helmet down over my western moustache and long nose.

We went to the two adjacent hospitals, the Vietnamese-German Hospital, and the City General Hospital (Benh-Vien Viet-Duc and Trung-Tam Y-Te Toan Khoa). The two hospitals were virtually deserted and had been badly looted and vandalized in the last minute escapades of Thieu's troops. We started to work with the ever-present gunfire sounding over our heads.

I was listening to a patient's chest at about noontime when I removed the stethoscope from my ears and sensed a difference in the street noise. The rifle fire had stopped. It was quiet. By one o'clock many more patients were coming in. By two and three o'clock nurses, doctors, and volunteers began to pitch in. By five o'clock there were groups of students organized about the city to bring in the wounded and the sick. By this time there were first aid squads and operating units at work in both the hospitals.

I left the hospital at 8 P.M. - having been so engrossed all day in patching up and bandaging that I never even asked what was happening outside. I found the streets rapidly returning to normal, no gunfire or warfare anywhere. All of the Saigon red and yellow flags were gone. There were flags of the Buddhist pagoda everywhere. I climbed into a jeep with people returning to the Pagoda, and suddenly there was a huge ARVN tank making straight toward us. But the tank was covered with cheering school children and decked out in Buddhist flags.

Then a jeep full of civilians passed us bearing the red, blue and gold Liberation flag. And then the flags of Liberation, the Provisional Revolutionary Government, were everywhere. Da Nang had been Liberated while I had been busy in the hospital. And yet as I thought back on it, I had seen the process happening during the day while working in the hospital. The cessation of bloodshed; the citizens returning to their tasks; the working together for the care of the people.

When we arrived at the Pagoda I saw an arsenal of weapons in the courtyard. Men and women came carrying armaments. Students brought in rocket launchers and grenades. Monks delivered mines and flares. There was a growing mountain of discarded M-16's, M-79's, rockets and mines. Students disarmed the guns and mines and the pile grew larger.

Here were the tools of war - the implements manufactured by the United States that for decades have meant loss of life, disability and tragedy for all Vietnamese people. And today they were being cast away. Today the practice of peace began.

Twelve Liberation Cadres came from a passageway up to the huge mound of abandoned ordnance. They soberly disarmed one of their own AK-47 rifles and cast it too among the weapons. Then they retired to the shadows to talk with the people of Da Nang.

I was awed. So many people had struggled for so many years that this country could be free of the oppression and bloodshed represented by that pile of dead rifles. So many people had died, lost limbs, shed blood on the discharge of these same weapons. And they laid them down.

This was Liberation Day, Da Nang.

III. Da Nang After Liberation.

What has happened in the city since Liberation? I have free range of the city and frequent the markets and shops. I do not buy much, but I attract attention and get into lots of conversations. I will tell you what I have learned about the Refugees and the City Security Force.

Refugees:

The first problem facing the city was that of the refugees. Da Nang's population used to be 600,000, many thousands of whom were old refugees, and squatters. There were people who had long ago been forced out of the countryside, and people who had followed the easy money of foreign-financed war. In the weeks before, another 500,000 displaced persons jammed into the alleyways, wharfs and slums. Some thousands went south by plane or boat, but most stayed behind.

With Liberation came the announcement that people would return to their homes. Not merely to go back to the places where they had just come from - the barbed-wire refugee camps, the tin-roofed "return to village" camps, the "new-life" camps, the "pacification" camps - but return home. Return to the ancestral homesteads which so many millions of Vietnamese in the south have been driven from and forcibly kept far from for three, five, eight, ten, fourteen years. Going home.

People were momentarily stunned. It was hard to grasp that the words meant what they said. People paused and blinked.

"But I've been one of Thieu's soldiers."

"So have thousands of others. People know you at home. Go back there."

"But I'll be considred a criminal."

"Not if you were conscripted or drafted. You can prove yourself by working hard on your land. Go home."

"But my wound is not yet healed."

"The hospitals and clinics are open in your area. All the people with illness will be cared for."

"But I have no money."

"Money does not buy your way back home, your food, or your way into the hospital. It is your right to go home. Article 11 of the Paris Peace Agreement guarantees it. It is the responsibility of the People's Revolutionary Government to help you get there; help you get rice; and to see that you get the medical care you need."

"But I have no means of travel."

"All People's Army vehicles on the roads know their responsbility to serve the people. If they are going your way, and if they have room, they will give you a ride."

"But I am from Saigon."

"Saigon will be liberated. In the meantime you will be given food and lodging. Afterwards you will go home."

And in the first three days of the week following, nearly half a million people did go home. To Quang Tri, Thua Thien, Hue, Quang Nam, Tam Ky, Quang Ngai, Pleiku, Kontum, and Ban Me Thuot. And others have followed them home in the weeks that followed. Not just the recent refugees, but many of those who had been forced or drawn into Danang during the last decade. So one month after Liberation the population of the city was 300,000 people.

What has happened to the people who fled by boat and plane? Many have already returned home. I met an Indian cloth merchant from Quang Ngai who told me that the Quaker's Indian friend Fatima and her daughter had gone south by boat just before Danang changed hands. I was concerned because some boats had been shelled by Thieu's forces, and others set adrift at sea, and many were lost. But yesterday on the street I met Fatima and her daughter, they had just returned to Danang by road from Nha Trang. After getting their stock of cloth here in Danang they will return and set up shop again in Quang Ngai.

Security Force:

The responsibility for organizing the people's return home, as well as the responsibility for opening the hospitals, schools, public offices, re-establishing a security force, transporting food, and a host of other tasks, belongs to the Committee of Military Affairs (Uy-Ban Quan-Quan Thi-Xa Da-Nang). This committee is made up of cadres and civilians of Danang who have struggled against foreign intervention during the past three decades. As to the effectiveness of this Committee, suffice it to say that the hospitals, schools, public offices, security force, and markets have opened and are operating normally. No, "normal" is saying too little.

This city does not merely have a new government, there is a new emphasis on ethics. Perhaps I can make my point by quoting a frequently asked question. Previously in Vietnam, one asked another: What do you do for a living?; How do you make money?; Where do you work?, Now the standard phrase is: "Where do you serve?"

Take the example of security, that is "law and order." To many who have experienced "law and order" in the streets of American cities, the term connotes swaggering cops obscured behind dark glasses and hands on holsters. Thieu's police force was an imitation of the American model, except that his cops were thinner. Of course there were those among Thieu's police who sincerely preferred directing traffic to fighting a war. But most military and civilian police joined with the overall scheme of rampant corruption and abused their power to extort bribes and get a good cut of the take. The situation is different now.

It is not that different men are filling the old jobs. A new consciousness of propriety, of what is right, is the new order. People living together in a society are learning they must respect life, the pursuit of enterprise, and property - both public and private. All of the people are equally responsible for making this work from the lowest levels to the highest. This means that a nurse in hospital will no longer tip the aspirin bottle and hand you two aspirins if you ask for a headache pill. Not until the patient is examined, the two aspirins are prescribed, the transaction of where the aspirins came from and went and who authorized it are recorded. By the same principle, the nurse, pharmacist, doctor, or director of the hospital can no longer pocket two aspirins, or two bottles, or two tons of medicine for his or her personal use or for sale on the black market. There is no rip-off.

In the streets the theft of wallets, watches, bicycles, motorcycles, robberies of homes, the demand for and payment of bribes are no longer accepted, expected and encouraged practices. This takes some getting used to, among certain segments of Danang's population, as they have functioned under the former premises for decades.

No one steals, everyone is responsible for the protection of life and property. This may sound pleasant, but naive and impractical to our American ears. But there are regions in Vietnam where this simple principle has been the practice since 1945 - apparently with phenomenal success. Part of the success, no doubt, stems from the fact that there are just fewer material goods. What a person does own, and what does belong to all the people, are so precious that they must be secure.

Take last night's robbery, for example. Two cadres who serve in the hospital answered a call from the street. They made a citizens arrest of a man stealing a watch from a girl. They turned the man over to the security forces, returned the watch, and reported the incident to the hospital director. A month ago, if hospital workers got involved at all, it would have been no surprise if they had kept the watch, or demanded a bribe from the man to let him go, and another bribe from the girl to get her watch back.

A Cable from Quaker Service team in Saigon received May 12:

LIBERATION OF THE CITY WAS ACCOMPLISHED SWIFTLY WITH THE MINIMUM OF BLOODSHED. THE MAJOR PART OF THE FIGHTING WAS CONFINED TO THE AIRPORT.

THE SITUATION HERE RETURNED TO NORMAL OR NEAR NORMAL EXTREMELY QUICKLY.

A DAY OR TWO LATER, MARKETS WERE OPEN AND BY THIS MONDAY MOST SHOPS HAD OPENED. SAIGON HAS SLIGHTLY LESS TRAFFIC AND SIGNIFICANTLY MORE SMALL TEA STANDS MAKING IT A MORE PLEASANT PLACE TO LIVE.

THE MILITARY ADMINISTRATION IS PLACING MAJOR EMPHASIS ON RESTORATION OF NORMALCY DISARMING SAIGON MILITARY AND POLICE AND CLEANING UP THE CITY. STUDENT AND YOUTH ORGANIZATIONS ARE WORKING ON A WHOLE SERIES OF TASKS FROM DIRECTING TRAFFIC, REGISTERING SAIGON SOLDIERS TO SECURITY AND GARBAGE DISPOSAL. LOCAL REVOLUTIONARY COMMITTEES ARE WORKING IN THEIR COMMUNITIES TO EXPLAIN PRINCIPLES OF NEW ADMINISTRATION.

PARTICULARLY IMPRESSIVE RELAXED CORDIAL RELATIONS BETWEEN LIBERATION FORCES AND PEOPLE OF SAIGON. NOTICEABLE THAT LIBERATION SOLDIERS IN CITY ARE LARGELY UN-ARMED.

OUR PRELIMINARY CONTACTS WITH THE MILITARY ADMINISTRATIVE COMMITTEE HAVE BEEN FRIENDLY AND ENJOYABLE. WE SHALL PROBABLY WAIT FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE CENTRAL ADMINISTRATION BEFORE TRAVELLING ANYWHERE.

MANY PEOPLE WHO FORMERLY HAD TO WORK IN SECRET ARE NOW VERY ACTIVE. THIS INCLUDES FORMER POLITICAL PRISONERS. THE PRISON COMMITTEE HAS TAKEN OVER THE HOUSE OF AMBASSADOR MARTIN'S DEPUTY WOLFGANG LEHMANN. FATHER TU OF THE COMMITTEE TO DEFEND WORKERS RIGHTS IS NOW WORKING IN THE LIBERATION TRADE UNION. NGUYEN HUU THAI IS CHAIRMAN OF SAIGON REVOLUTIONARY YOUTH.

MOST GOVERNMENT BRANCHES AND SERVICES ARE ALREADY WORKING REORGANIZING "TO SERVE THE PEOPLE WITHOUT CORRUPTION."

THE ELECTRICAL WORKERS ON THE JOB REPAIRING POWER LINES THE DAY AFTER FIGHTING STOPPED.

THE LOGISTICS BRANCH OF MINISTRY OF HEALTH IS OPEN WITH OLD STAFF INCLUDING FORMER DIRECTOR. MEDICAL SERVICES SUCH AS BARSKY UNIT AND SEVENTH DAY ADVENTIST HOSPITAL ALSO OPEN BUT THERE IS A SHORTAGE OF DOCTORS DUE TO EVACUATION.

WORKERS IN FORMERLY AMERICAN SUPPORTED INSTITUTIONS ARE TOLD THEIR PLACES OF WORK NOW BELONG TO THEM AND THE CITY BELONGS TO THE PEOPLE.

Copies of this Letter available from Indochina Program, c/o American Friends Service Committee, 1501 Cherry Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19102.

20¢ each: \$1.20/10; \$8/100* (*plus postage)