

Quang Ngai, South Vietnam

NEWSLETTER #

Dear Friends:

It has been a little in excess of two months since I pounded out Newsletter #2 and that's not a particularly enviable record. However, I have some excellent excuses....Now if I could just remember what they were, I'd be in a better position to beg forgiveness. (grin) Letters from all of you have been coming in faster than I can acknowledge them by personal responses but I am sure you all know how much I appreciate them.

The last two months have been busy ones, as one would expect. Time flies over here for all of us. You walk out the gate on Monday morning and get swept up in the vortex of life in Quang Ngai. By the time it "spits you out" again you find yourself sitting sleepily on the bed wondering how the heck it got be Sunday morning so soon. It's one of the good features of life over here, though. It gives us no time to brood, worry or pace....all ulcer-spawning activities and frowned upon by the AMA....We keep so busy trying to solve the solveable problems that we have little time to fret about the unsolveable ones. I wonder sometimes if we aren't so deeply immersed in the "problem called Vietnam" that we are losing our objectivity about it. Often I catch myself reacting to certain situations here with typical Quang Ngai provincialism. And that is not always good! (grin)

In high school we were always taught that a good paper ends with a concise but coherent summary. However, now that I am a "grownup" I take great delight in kicking over the traces of some of the literary restrictions drilled into us and developing my own (illiterate and ungrammatical) style. So, first, I am going to generally summarize what has gone on with the Quaker team since the 21st of September and then will go back and give you some chronological vignettes that I think you might be interested in.

The last week and a half of September (after I had sent out the last newsletter) was pretty hectic, militarily speaking. The 28th of September the large Milphap warehouse, which is about three feet from the Quaker Rehabilitation Center, was shelled and burned to the ground. Thousands and thousands of dollars worth of medical supplies and equipment went up in smoke and the disabled and sick of Quang Ngai province are still going without necessary items due to that tragedy. You will all be glad to know and probably as incredulous as we were to learn that the QRC wasn't even so much as singed. However, the next night we learned that the Quakers weren't entirely immune to the fates of fortune in this war. Both Marge Nelson's office and my shop were liberally sprayed with bullets. Did no real damage (other than a wounded wheelchair) but sobered us considerably as we daily contemplated the ruins of the building right next to us. We have never had any proof that the Viet Cong were even on the hospital grounds the night that the QRC was fired into but we do know that ARVN troops were swarming all over the place after the previous night's attack on MILPHAP. After that, all was quiet around here (comparatively speaking) until the night of October 14th when the heralded Russian rocket attack on Quang Ngai took place. You will be amused to learn that we had no inkling that we had been hit by a rocket attack (much less RUSSIAN rockets!) until we heard about it over BBC on Joe Clark's shortwave radio. (grin) The only thing that made it seem unique to us was that several of the rockets came in after we had gone to work. Other than TET of this year, this has not happened since the Quakers have been in Quang Ngai. Since then, things have been blissfully quiet here. We had a very mild attack two weeks ago but you could tell the boys weren't putting their heart into it....on either side!

The military presence is still very much with us, as is the atmosphere of a war, but we have had a delightful and interesting preview of what Vietnam might be like should peace ever return to this land.

I wish I could report that the decreased military activity has resulted in a marked drop in civilian wounded, but such does not seem to have been the case. While the numbers of all-out assaults on Quang Ngai have fallen off to almost nothing, the small-scale skirmishes and the true guerilla warfare has gone on. The bombing halt, the American elections, the on-again-off-again peace talks in Paris -- none of it means a thing to the patients who keep straggling through that hospital gate.

Many of you have asked me what the reaction of the local people was to the American elections and the bombing halt. That's kind of like asking if all daisies have ten petals. I don't have access to that kind of information and, so far, Gallup and Harris have been too busy keeping track of American opinion to try to test the "winds of Vietnam." (grin) Generally speaking, our limited group of Vietnamese friends who will speak about such delicate things with us felt utter despair when they heard of the bombing halt and were elated by Nixon's election. These are the friends who are pro-Saigon or, at least, say that they are. I, for one, am rarely sure of anything I am told over here and am sometimes even dubious of what I see. I will describe in detail a little later on the reaction of one of our very close friends to the bombing halt. Our patients? The great majority of them know nothing but the vaguest details of the politics involved in their personal tragedies. My guess is that their feelings could be best expressed as a pure and simple desire for peace....a peace at any price and under any flag that will bring them that peace. Maybe I misjudge them but I often feel that most of the people that we deal with from day to day don't have a nationalistic bone in their body.

For all of this "froth on the brew" over here, we have been able to continue to work as "a good brew should." In spite of the tense months of August and September, we never missed a day of work at the Rehab. Center although, on a few days, not all of our employees were able to get in to work due to fighting in their home areas. The CDCC was closed two days....not because of man-made catastrophes, but due to floods. This period of working closely together with the Vietnamese people during such trying times has made us secure in the knowledge that we can do the job ~~and we set out~~ to do here despite the fluctuating level of hostilities. During the first week of October the US AID nurses were evacuated to Da Nang just as a precautionary measure. The military intelligence had picked up the information that Quang Ngai was in "dire peril." In actual fact that attack never came and it wasn't until after the nurses had returned that we had the Russian rocket attack. (grin) But, if nothing else in Quang Ngai works well, the grapevine system is unexcelled. The hospital population knew the same intelligence the military did and they watched to see if we were going to leave, too. It was "business as usual" for the Quakers and the patients responded to it by taking considerable trouble to get in to us for their treatments or prosthetic fittings. We are also considerably heartened by the fact that our friends and employees haven't shied away from our company during even the heaviest fighting nor has their attitude changed perceptibly since the bombing halt (which did seem to result in some increased anti-American feelings here in Quang Ngai). However, good old America redeemed itself in the eyes of the pro-Saigon "man on the street" by electing Richard Nixon as its next president. An interesting sidelight to that tragedy (or triumph, depending on how you look at it) is that it is fairly well known over here that Nixon is (or was) a Quaker. The thing we haven't figured out yet is whether that is going to help us or hurt us. (GRIN)

On some evenings and weekends our team is having "chalk talks" and practice sessions on emergency triage and first aid work by our favorite Bac-Si (doctor), Marge Nelson. We are divided into four two-man teams and are in the process of hammering out a plan of action to be coordinated with the hospital's emergency plans. In the event that an attack of sufficient magnitude to shut down our rehab. center occurs, we will immediately move into action as an extra emergency medical team on the hospital grounds until such time as we can resume rehab operations. While we have spent a great deal of time in discussion of emergency planning, evacuation from Quang Ngai or from Vietnam has never been discussed. We have proven that we can function under most circumstances, we are delighted that we seem to be accepted as an appropriate helping hand (by both sides) and we will stay as long as we are needed and/or welcome. In short, AFSC couldn't pay us to be anywhere else!

Enough of summarizing, then....I'll just leaf through my journal and pull out a few items for your interest.

FAMILY LIFE IN QUANG NGAI.....

September 28, 1968

"After lunch today the 12-year-old brother of Thanh (6-year-old girl....patient partially paralyzed below waist due to possible polio. Pictured in many of AFSC's Quang Ngai literature. Known to QRC for well over a year now. In fact, she was one of our first patients. Number 4, I believe.) came to our house to get me and we walked to his home so I could visit with his parents and siblings. Phuc has been after me to come to his home and visit for a long time now. Since I didn't have any idea of where he lived, we arranged this morning that he would come get me after lunch. We set off on foot as Phuc had said that he lived near the hospital. His "near" turned out to be closer to a mile and a half! Fortunately, it was fairly cool. Several times while we were walking along Phan Boi Chau road, people said something to him in Vietnamese. The way he hurried past them without a word in reply (Phuc is generally excessively polite to people) and hastily engaged me in conversation makes me think that the comments were not complimentary ones. It is not a particularly safe nor comfortable thing for a Vietnamese to be in the company of an American these days. Phuc led me through a maze of crowded and filthy streets and dirt rut paths. We threaded our way through groups of dogs and kids, dog, horse, and people "piles", baskets of drying mushrooms and rice. Finally we came to a section with a jumble of tiny open-front shacks jammed up against each other, looking for all the world like a bunch of jackstraws. Phuc steered me around an open pool of sewage and through a mob of gaping little urchins. It was obvious that I had been expected by the whole neighborhood.

Home for Phuc and family was a crowded single room. Maybe 12 x 20 feet or so. In one corner was a pitifully small pile of sandbags that could serve to protect them only from one direction and gave no overhead shelter from fragments or direct hits. A small grubby wooden table and four tottering bamboo chairs graced the front of the room and, in the dark gloom of the back, was a double bed-sized sleeping platform covered neatly with a clean but ragged bedspread. Jammed into the remaining space was what passed for a dresser with a mirror, cracked and stained with age. A couple of benches and some splintered cupboards completed the decor. As soon as I entered, the mother met me and bowed me in to a chair at the table. The swarms of children followed and soon the open front of the home was completely ringed with the curious. My struggles with the language sent them into paroxysms of laughter....My brace was cause for all kinds of speculation (some of which I understood and was enough to send me into paroxysms of my own..Grin) The father

appeared from somewhere in his shorts and hastily donned his uniform. Father is an ARVN soldier and has been for some 12 years or so. It is a custom here in Vietnam for men to wear trousers and shirt only when going to and from work or when visiting, etc. As soon as they get home or to work, off come the pants and shirt. No one thinks a thing about it and it does make a lot of sense. But for me -- The American visitor, the "dog was being put on."

To my absolute horror, li'l fuzzy things began dashing around my feet and a hasty and furtive investigation under the table proved them to be the cutest li'l chicks you'd ever want to see. One of them finally managed to get tangled up in my brace and shoestrings, much to the amusement of the assembled. Once dressed, the papa sat down with me and plied me with numerous cups of lukewarm Vietnamese tea, bananas and topped it off with a torrid cup of black coffee. Wow! That stuff was wicked! Black as tar and just about as tasty. Anyway, I ate and drank with relish and managed to carry on a half-way decent conversation with papa. Mother just flitted about in the shadows getting the refreshments from some unknown mysterious source until just before I was obviously going to leave. Then she stood still for a few minutes of talk. All the time I was visiting, Phuc stood behind me and fanned like mad so that the sweat flew and my hair stood on end. The parents asked such questions as: How long I intended to stay in Vietnam? Was I married and did I have any children? And, if not, why not? Did I like Vietnam and the usual lines of inquiry. With that out of the way, the father did me the supreme honor of beginning to talk to me about the war (a topic usually avoided like the plague by Vietnamese when talking to Americans. He told me that he had been a soldier for 12 years and had 4 more to go and, even then, couldn't plan on being free of military service. His entire adult life, his best productive years, spent in peril and poverty. He was quite bitter about this and it was sad to see his attitude of hopelessness and know full well how right his predictions probably were..."

And a short, short story....occurring just a few days after the MILPHAP warehouse came tumbling down....

October 1, 1968

"As Marge and I walked into the hospital grounds this morning, we saw a thirty-foot-long line of VC prisoners assembled in front of the temporary MILPHAP "warehouse" waiting to be assigned to work at cleaning up the still smoking site. Such irony in this crazy damn war! The NFL troops destroy it and their captured comrades are forced to help rebuild it. Some would call this poetic justice, I imagine, but to me it is just one more example of the utter futility of war.

In the midst of all this lunacy, our sweet gentle "Rick" restores a breath of normalcy. He returned yesterday from one of his business trips to Saigon and, this time, he had with him a pair of hamsters. Last time it was a plastic, water-filled bag of tropical fish! All for the kids at the CDCC. By tonight he has converted a 2 x 3 foot packing crate into an adorable two-story hamster house...complete with glass front so the kids can follow the daily activities of the occupants. The back wall is screening for ventilation and inside are feeding troughs, a water tube and even a ramp to the upstairs, complete with match-stick steps....Lucky kids Lucky hamsters, lucky us...."

And for an illustration of how Vietnamese customs and traditions have suffered from the years of struggle and restriction....

October 6, 1968

"Yesterday and today were the Vietnamese Autumn Tet days. They always fall at the time of a full moon. It's a lunar celebration and has come to be more of a children's festival than an honoring of ancestral spirits. The goings-on kind of remind me of Halloween in the States. Keith (Brinton) was saying that last year

Quang Ngai had several days of tremendous celebrations. Big dragon leading a snake dance all over town, throwing of smoke bombs (for fun), hundreds of kids all over the streets with paper lanterns and numerous parties; at churches, pagodas, boy and girl scout groups and the like. But Quang Ngai is very different now.... just a year later. The CDCC had a party for their youngsters on Friday, seeing as how they aren't open on Saturday or Sunday. Tonight we noticed a big crowd at the Buddhist pagoda just down the road. They were obviously in the midst of a gala party and we remarked as we went by that it was just the sort of gathering that the VC like to break up with a satchel charge or a hand grenade. Fortunately, there were no such incidents today that we know of. Further down Phan Boi Chau road, a soccer game was in progress with a very small crowd in attendance. Then we saw a dozen or so kidlets running around downtown with lighted lanterns, squealing and darting in and out of the dark shadows. I guess we should be grateful that the people here have at least had a peaceful few days for their celebrations but it seems obvious that the war has put quite a damper on the fun."

And some times are for laughing....

October 7, 1968

"Just after I went back to work this afternoon, one of the ARVN idiots (after MILPHAP warehouse was destroyed, an entire company of ARVN soldiers was moved onto the hospital grounds, complete with mortars and personal weapons to "protect us". We never felt more insecure in our lives!) fired off a burst of automatic fire right outside the door to my department. I went right straight up at least two feet....and came down a-cussin' and clutching myself all over trying to find the bullet holes that I was sure I had been perforated with! If the soldiers were watching, I'm sure they had a good laugh. GROWL!! One of these days! I find it distinctly difficult to "love" the ARVN soldier!"

That's most as bad as what happened to Margy a few weeks back. She was riding her bike home from the hospital when she heard a loud explosion right near her and felt something hit her foot. She skidded to a stop, sure that she had either been shot or had triggered a small mine. Turned out her back tire had blown out! She shook for a week and we didn't help any by teasing.

To say we are jumpy is the understatement of the year. (grin)"

About that bombing half....

November 1, 1968

"At dinner tonight all of us were ecstatic in our celebration of this latest step toward eventual peace. It was with considerable shock that we listened to our good friend and sometime language teacher, Anh -----, emotive emotionally later as we visited over tea. We don't, of course, know how much of Quang Ngai or Viet-Nam Anh -----'s opinion represents. He is educated and poor, but not one of the peasant class by any means... He was shaken and near tears. He is a good enough friend to be brutally frank with us and while we think he is genuinely fond of us, he harbors no love for Americans in general. He said that "everybody" (meaning Vietnamese in Quang Ngai) thinks that the Americans have already been in contact with the NFL and are perhaps secretly planning how they will divide up South Vietnam. He felt the US would want to keep hold of certain parts of the country such as Cam Ranh Bay for instance. His most heart-breaking comment was that he felt they (the South Vietnamese still pro-Saigon) were losing the last vestige of control over their destiny. Being one of the Americans at the table, that last comment, coming from such a good friend, hurt. My immediate response was to say, "Oh no, Anh -----! America will never do a thing like that to your

nearby moved out through the drizzle to help him. He came in with the first stretcher and then came out and stood by me as the Vietnamese fellows unloaded the little girl. I made a remark to the marine indicating my depression and sorrow for the beating the civilians were taking in this war and his response left me speechless with rage at first and, later, with pity for him. He gave me a withering glance, spat contemptuously into the mud at his feet and said, "The goddamned Slopeheads keep getting in the way!" Then he ran out through the rain and pulled himself into the departing helicopter. Sitting here tonight, I'm wondering how much of that angry bitterness was a protective shell for an exhausted, miserable, and emotionally torn young medic. He couldn't have been much over 20 and his is a grim business. Somehow I feel much less inclined tonight to wish her were stripped of his emotional defenses. God knows, the lad needs all the defenses he can erect. He's as much a victim of this bureaucratic insanity over here as anyone else and his scars are as real as those of the casualties he gathers up.

But, in his youthful bitterness, he spoke the truth. Indeed, they do keep getting in the way of the combatants....as they eat and sleep in their homes, as they jog to market with their home-grown produce swinging in baskets hung from their shoulder poles, as they work in their rice fields, as they study their letters and numbers in the classrooms, as they try to relax in the tiny cafes after work....Yes, I have to agree with him. They do keep getting in the way of this war.

The emergency ward was kept filled much of this morning with the refuse of last night's battles. Nothing much different from similar days in similar weeks in similar months past. They all bleed the same, cry the same. No difference, really. Just as much dirt and human excreta crusting their bodies, just as many flies swarming over the wounds, just as much medical mismanagement. Nothing here to make the public back home sit up and take notice. After all, you've seen one die; you've seen them all. This phase of the war is "old hat" to the daily pre-viewers of the news back home, I'm sure. Now that the bombing halt has taken place in the north, we will soon see peace restored in Vietnam and, of course, a few people always get hurt during the mopping-up operations of a war. Tragis, really, but unavoidable. I can imagine the complacency spawned by the bombing halt and the election of a new president and a new party....

Most of our team went over to the emergency room at some time this morning. As we try to groom ourselves to act as a first aid team during a major disaster, Marge has been encouraging the lay members of the team to go into the emergency area when they have an opportunity to accustom themselves to what they would face in such a situation. So what's new? I think every one of us could tell the bored and complacent optimists back home what's new. The little girl who has an enormous gaping hole where a bullet tore through her body and out her rectum is new! It never happened to her before. The little boy with the tiny hole in his throat has never drowned in his own blood before and never will again....He's one of those who will never know anything about "peace in Vietnam". He was conceived and born into a world of war and, this morning, he died in a world of war. The woman with a jagged piece of shrapnel in her foot and a wounded child in her arms hasn't quite received the optimistic message about the incipient outbreak of peace yet. The overtaxed and underskilled medical technicians on the Vietnamese hospital staff haven't noticed any change. The tired and bitter marine medic doesn't anticipate any early return to his home. That's the way things are, here in Vietnam tonight. The war goes on....and the goddamned Slopeheads keep getting in the way....."

And on this first day of December, 1968, my main concern is giving all of you

a clear and truthful picture of what it is like to work with the Quaker team in Quang Ngai. I hope I have represented all phases and moods in their proper dimensions. Life here is many faceted....It's beautiful and ugly; it's tragic and comic; it's depressing and, at the same time, stimulating.

Thanksgiving has come and gone quietly and, as Christmas approaches, my thoughts turn towards those of you at home. Here, the day will pass with little notice and that is how it should be. But the pull of childhood memories of festive holidays with all their religious and commercial traditions are strong and I find myself wishing fervently that you can all continue to enjoy them as you have in years past. My thoughts will be very much with all of you and my prayers will be for your happiness and good health in the coming year. God bless you, every one...

May I add my greetings
and wishes - lots more

Love

Dot Weller

9/12/03

Alcatel-Lucent Confidential - Johnson



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