

Mrs. M. J. Weller

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A voice from Quang Ngai, Vietnam calls out on this 22nd day of September, 1968, hoping to be heard by so many good friends left so far behind in another land...

A voice cries out of many things; so strange, so brutal, so incomprehensible to those living in a world of a happier brand...

A voice raised in fervent hope that loved ones will listen well and try to understand...

Dear Friends:

Such are my feelings as I start off on Newsletter #2. There is so much I want to share with you but so little time to put it down on paper in the detail that I would like. I came back to Vietnam determined that I would write the newsletters from here rather than asking my mother to excerpt from my letters home but I may yet have to fall back on her literary support to get word to you as often as I would like. However, in as much as I can these will be first hand reports of the life surrounding and involving the Quakers in Vietnam.

Some of my readers will have to bear with a little repetition. But on the other hand, there may well be things in this newsletter that didn't come through in other letters written to you. If, however, this second dose of reporting becomes too tedious for you, permission is granted for cancellation of your subscription. (grin) In a more serious vein I would ask that nothing of what appears in these newsletters be printed elsewhere without the consent of the International Services Division of the American Friends Service Committee in Philadelphia.

There's little need, I'm sure, to say how wonderful it is to be back in Quang Ngai where the need is so overwhelming and obvious. In some respects I found things very familiar to me but at the same time was shocked by the change in the "city" and the faces of its people. The first few days were happy ones and sad. Joyfully greeting old friends, patients, employees who had "made it" through the bad days early in 1968 and learning of those who didn't. Finding amputees, who had just begun their prosthetic fittings before the '68 TET holidays to be left staring wistfully and in bitter disappointment at the padlocked doors of the Quaker Rehabilitation Center, straggling back in as the word got around that the Quakers were back in business.

The changes of which I speak were not all as obvious as the miles and miles of concertina wire strung along the roads and around buildings or the rice paddies now converted to mine fields... Some were much more nebulous than that. I still carried a compact for one who had been here before. The people seem tense in and have a grim air of expectancy about them. They hurry as they go to and fro to their daily tasks. Life has to go on as usual if they are to survive but it goes on in a very tense and electric atmosphere. Rarely now do we hear the small "banh mi day" boys hawking their pungent loaves of bread up and down Phu Loi Chau road nor the men calling out "Pho" to announce the arrival of the hot noodle wagon. I had been here a week before I noticed this and the silence in the roads after the 8 p.m. curfew. The children now are kept inside the huts for the most part in the evenings and we miss the sound of their boisterous play. It used to go on until late at night. The city seems to crouch silently after darkness falls, not daring to stir until the first rooster crow notifies us that another night has passed without an attack and we can get up and go to work in comparative safety.

The hospital grounds themselves have taken on the appearance of a battlefield. Zig-zagged trenches have been dug and multiple numbers of bunkers appear in what are supposed to be strategic points. There are occasional one-man foxholes dotted around

the grounds collecting trash, rain water and human excreta as do the trenches and bunkers. I can't imagine anyone foolish enough to jump into one in the dark. (grin) Much to our dismay, two of those fox holes appeared one morning near the front of the rehabilitation center. Strange as it may seem those two holes seem to be filling up faster than some of the others. I know every time I pass them on my way to work I seem to stumble a bit and dirt inadvertently spills in. Must clean that out some day. (grin) Most of the ward buildings are sandbagged around some of the windows leaving just a slit for firing from and the porches and end rooms half filled with sandbags. Armed guards roam the hospital grounds during the day. At night I'm not sure what they do. Guess it depends on where their allegiance lies.

As an example of just one of the ironies of this unbelievable war, take last night's attack. Several weeks back a nine man patrol of Viet Cong invaded the hospital grounds doing no damage but intimidating some of the patients in an effort to get some information. There apparently wasn't a shot fired and the hospital administration announced that, as a result, they had increased their hospital security...presumably by completely surrounding it with barbed wire and increasing the guard. So last night a 30 man V.C. patrol swarmed all over the hospital grounds. Only one guard rose up to defend the place apparently and the V.C. shot him on the spot. Then they proceeded to take some medications from the burn ward and planted a plastic bomb under one of the hospital's ambulances and blew it into a thousand pieces. One of those pieces pierced the roofing of the porch on the rehabilitation center but did no other damage. This is not particularly an isolated incident. The ease with which the NFL troops carry off their maneuvers around here makes one really wonder just how many South Vietnamese government sympathizers there are in this large province.

Since I arrived back in Quang Ngai on August 13th we have had four or five major attacks on the city. Interspersed with those are frequent light probing attacks to constantly remind us that the "enemy" hasn't gone away. The local military intelligence has told us that there is an entire NVA regiment lurking within a dozen or so miles of here and that they have photographic evidence of Russian-made tanks in the area as well. True or not? Who knows? I don't doubt it a bit nor do I doubt that if the NFL and the NVA troops wanted to take Quang Ngai that they could do it and hold the city for a good period of time. At least until the U.S. poured hundreds more troops in here to "re-liberate" the people. Its fair to say that Quang Ngai is under a state of seige and for awhile the seige consisted of more than war. Here I'd like to insert a lengthy quote from one of my letters home...written on August 26th.

"When I say DRY folks, I'm not just talking! The only wet thing around here is me and about two feet at the bottom of our very cruddy well. Whew! We're spitting dust and chewing the same. The only thing it ain't at the moment is humid. (Not very anyway.) Quang Ngai's water supply has failed. Since the 20th the entire population has been dependent on scattered wells with precious little water in them. After just six days, the situation is critical for most and desperate for many. Most of we "foreigners" can pretty well count on having sufficient supply of canned beer and soft drink so won't perish from lack of fluids. It takes little imagination to visualize the situation here as it is compounded by increased casualties, cut off supply lines, vicious heat and nightly attacks or at least the threat of attacks. The hospital is completely without water and has been for six or seven days now. We have a well at the rehab. center with what Lou estimates to be some 2 feet of water that fortunately maintains itself at that level. How long the water tables will hold is a matter for speculation. The people, and particularly the patients, are showing the effects of dehydration. We wonder, even with their years of experience, how long they could hold out without water. An increase in disease is bound to match the diminishing supply of potable water. The nurses from the hospital have been coming to us in despair (U.S. AID nurses, that is), wanting to share our meagre supply...We'll share it as far as it will go but it's not enough to

even make a dent in their needs. Can you imagine a 440-bed hospital with well over 550 patients with no water? No toilet facilities as usual and the incinerator our boys repaired for them useless again. They have resorted to digging a huge pit and burning all their trash. Trouble is that they don't burn it often enough.

For a few days after the water stopped in the city's pipes, we kept our well top locked...Feeling this probably was a disruption in lines by explosions or foul play by the Viet Cong and a short term thing. I wrote in my journal on August 22: (Not having any water over here at the center makes things a wee bit difficult. As we do here at the house, we have a small supply of brackish water but it leaves much to be desired. The time-consuming process involves going out to the well with a bucket on a long rope and pulling up a pailful, lugging the top to the well so all the roving patients and relatives can't get to it, carrying bucket in and transferring it to a big kettle, boiling the water for five minutes on a small stove and then letting it cool enough to use for a patient soak. Less than efficient but that is what we have to work with for the moment. Some of my patients are just having to go without hot soaks or even having their wounds washed as there simply isn't enough to go around. It is pure HELL having to deny the patients access to the well but those damn priorities always have to be considered. We don't always, of course. It is so easy to just forget to lock the well for a short while and keep your back turned. Nobody has more than the bare minimum of water and for most that must go for drinking. The patients are hot and filthy and rapidly becoming dehydrated. Today I had just left the well to put water on to boil. As I walked into the center door I noticed a little blur streaking behind me. It took me longer than usual to get to the stove and quite awhile to get the water into the kettle. As I was thus occupied I casually looked out the window. Squatting about twenty feet from the well was that little "blur"...Now naked and pouring her pitifully small can of stolen cruddy water over her head and rubbing her body vigorously with her spare hand. For one fleeting moment she was cool again and comparatively clean. The last bit in the can she gulped down and I winced as I thought of the contamination in that well. Necessity and deprivation create real ingenuity. This little gal, maybe six or so, had taken off her clothes and stood on them as she took her bath. Afterwards she wrung them out and re-dressed. No, not clean by anyone's standards, but at least cool and somewhat fresher. I hate to think of what an extended drought will mean to these people. Once again I am reminded anew of how much for granted we take the simple turning on of a faucet, the instant supply of "safe" water, the flushing of a toilet, plenty of soap ...all back in the sophisticated world. There's no such assurance here.)

However, the water shortage is just one of Quang Ngai's current threats. I'm sure that the newspapers have been filled with stories of the renewed offensive over here. At least I hope they are. We are guessing that Quang Ngai isn't the only part of the country under heavy attack but no news has filtered in other than John's report of simultaneous attacks in Da Nang. After I arrived back here I was struck by the contrast between the increased military presence and fortifications and the extreme quietness. The H & I (harassment and interdiction) fire that was with us every night last year is a thing of the past and there was little or nothing to disturb our nights sleep. This really had me puzzled but that short period of quiet was illusory. Quang Ngai received a major blow early on the morning of the 23rd day of August. The only way I can describe the feeling here now is that the city is under a state of siege that waxes and wanes in intensity but never dissipates. Any statements we make regarding the plans, motives or capabilities of the NLF and the NVA around here are pure speculation. We have no way of knowing what is going on other than word of mouth reports, observation and rumors. I'm sure those of you who have lived through a war situation know how fast and wild rumors can grow. But the siege is real. Quang Ngai, plus its collective ARVN troops and allied troops, is on the defensive. It seems obvious that we are not only completely surrounded but thoroughly infiltrated by the "enemy". (Grin) We suspect that there are large numbers of North Vietnamese troops in the area as well as the

indigenous Viet Cong. But just so I don't skip anything, let me refer to the journal again...

(August 23rd, 1:30 p.m.: Quang Ngai has been hit and hit hard. The prospects for more in the next six hours seem certain. I read last night later than usual. The hub-bub of military activity out in the street wasn't conducive to sleep and neither was the heat. Had I known what was in store, I would have grabbed a few winks while I could. When I turned out the light at 11:30 it was comparatively quiet but by midnight it was obvious that the Viet Cong were launching their second attack in two nights in Quang Ngai. Although the concussion of the mortar shells, hand grenades and the like were shaking the house I knew the fighting was out near the airstrip...some two to three miles away. So I tried to ignore it and get some sleep. But it was impossible. The ruckus kept getting louder and louder and closer.

None of us ever got to sleep. 1:30 a.m. found both Lou and I pacing nervously outside trying to decide whether it was bad enough to move to the main house where one inner room is completely sandbagged as our "bunker". Co Cam Van (Vietnamese CDCC employee) was really frightened and was huddled under her sheet in the room next to mine. She and I are quartered upstairs in Pixton Hall and Lou bunks downstairs. Lou and I concluded, much to our regret later, that most of the firing was outgoing...from friendly ARVN and U.S. guns. Noisy, but not necessarily dangerous. We decided to go back to bed and try to get some sleep, feeling that the VC were just harassing. I stopped in Co Cam Van's room to reassure her and then went back to bed. The noise was steadily increasing. The concussions of the explosions were shaking the whole building. About 2:30 a.m. the building lurched to an ear-splitting blast and my alarm clock flew off the footlocker by my bed. A heavy bomb from a U.S. plane had hit very close by, which gave us our first clue that the VC (and/or NVA troops) were close in or actually in the town. We began to realize that the VC mortars were "walking" in closer and closer and the U.S. bombs were pursuing them. About 10 minutes later a tremendous series of explosions went off seemingly right in our ear. The shells were now dropping right in on top of us. With that realization I rolled to the floor and under the bed in one quick motion. As I did so the screen door to my room blew in and slammed against the wall. That series of blasts were the beginning of a rip-roaring battle. As soon as our voices could be heard, Lou and I yelled to each other to find out if the other was ok and when I called to Co Cam Van I got a pitiful and terrified "Da, ok". I didn't know how to say "stay put" in Vietnamese so just prayed that she would. For 15 or 20 solid minutes mortar after mortar came in...spraying the buildings with metal fragments. Unbelievably, the houses took no direct hits all night! All of the ARVN artillery emplacements were firing as fast as they could re-load. ARVN mortar tubes were set up all over the street out in front and they were firing dozens of rounds per minute. Those tubes must have been red hot. It was a horrifying cacophony of war and death. The night seemed to fairly shriek with hate and terror. When we could hear, other sounds forced their way through to our consciousness...babies crying, dogs barking or yelping from terror, roosters crowing their protest, men yelling, my own harsh and shallow breathing in the dust under the bed. Bullets, shells and shrapnel were whizzing everywhere. As Martha Fort mentioned in her tape of a similar attack, I wondered if anyone knew what he was shooting at. They seemed to be in absolute panic and were firing in all directions and at anything that moved. It was bright as day outside from the flares they kept firing off and later were dropped from a small plane.

Finally there was a brief lull in which Lou yelled that he was going to make a run for it and get the main house unlocked so we could get into the bunker. "You two come when you can, Dot," he called. Another spate of firing forced me back into the dust (must remember to clean my room more often!) for 10 minutes or so. I prayed fervently that Lou had made it across the yard. After a particularly vicious blast, I

called to Co Cam Van, "O.K., Cam Van, O.K.?" The poor girl, in her terror and confusion thought I was calling her to make a dash for the house. The next thing I knew...I was watching with horror as Cam Van streaked past my door heading for the stairs, through a man-killing hail of bullets and shrapnel. She made a beautiful target in the brilliant orange light of the flares. I just buried my head in my arms and groaned, "Oh God, she'll never make it." A few minutes later the most wonderful sound in the world broke through...Lou was calling that he and Cam Van were in the other house and safe. It was a mighty lonely twenty minutes before things quieted down enough for me to make my run for it. Three times I rolled out from under the bed to crawl over to my leg brace and three times blasts drove me back under for protection. I knew I couldn't move as fast as I would want to, once out on that porch, without it. Finally I got it on and crawled near the open doorway. I waited for a lull and a moment of darkness. All those trigger-happy soldiers needed was to see me running down the porch! The moment came...AND I RAN!!! There's nothing we "handicapped" can't do if we're scared enough! (grin) Made it as far as the covered stairwell and stayed there for a bit and then made the final sprint to the main house.

In the bunker we (Lou, Cam Van and I were the only ones here) slumped down against the sandbags and stared at each other with glazed expressions. The battle raged until 5:30 or 6:00. Helicopter gunships (Puff the Magic Dragon, they call them!) that fire 4000 rounds a minute had come in and were belching forth red molten death. Lou and I crept upstairs for a look at these military monsters and it was a revolting sight that I'll never forget. Small planes were dropping flare after flare, big planes spewing their bombs from gaping black bellies...thousands of tracer bullets stitched the black velvet sky in beautiful patterns. It was beautiful, terrifying, sickening...It was a nightmare! In my mind I kept screaming, "There are people out there you fools! Stop it!"

As things gradually became quieter and dawn was breaking, Lou and I went outside to the front gate and looked out on Phan Boi Chau road in disbelief. We saw no damage to speak of, no bodies and we saw the people of Quang Ngai rising up like wraiths out of their bunkers and heading off for their day's work as if nothing unusual had happened. By now I was so tired that I thought maybe we had dreamed it all. But we hadn't by a long shot! There has been plenty of damage done, there are plenty of bodies. None of it just happened to be in sight of our front gate at that moment. Lou estimated that at least a dozen shells had come in within 150 yards of our house. As we stood by the gate watching, the wounded and dead began to stream by in vehicles of all kinds toward the hospital. The city, shaking off the numbing shock of the night, was beginning to lick her wounds and start moving around. Only now were we beginning to hear the cries of pain and grief from the stunned people. This parade of the bereaved and suffering was mixed in with the traffic of people calmly and dispassionately going to work...Bullets were still whizzing ominously around. Ba Nuoi and CoThanh (our two housekeepers -- one very pregnant) marched resolutely through our gate only a few minutes after their usual time, looking grim and nervous but determined to carry on business as usual. Lou and I looked at each other, shrugged and decided we could do no less than these patient and long-suffering folk. We decided that I would go the hospital to see if I could help with the casualties and he would see if he could drive Co Cam Van through to the CDCC to open it up for the children. He found the CDCC was ok...no damage but, understandably, no children showed up.

I took a deep breath as I walked through the gate onto Phan Boi Chau road. Following the example of the brave and stoic town people (didn't carry it off as well as they, though...with me it was ALL sham...grin) and ignoring the random bullets and explosions I went directly to the hospital. Patients were pouring in. It was before 8:00 a.m. and no doctors were on duty...as usual!! There was only one medical layman there, looking as if he was about to do something, and a handful of Vietnamese nurses

who looked as if they weren't about to do anything! All the people I saw were badly hurt. Three bodies came in while I was standing there. I went to the emergency area and looked for bandages, disinfectant and the like. There was nothing there but dead, wounded and the grieving relatives. I had nothing to work with and couldn't do a thing for them. There wasn't a drop of water to offer them, even. I had exhausted my own supply of bandages and medications in the physical therapy department the day before. Literally sick to my stomach, I came home after checking to see if there had been any damage to the Rehab. Center. There hadn't been and a number of our patients were milling around, wondering if we were going to open. "Why not" I thought. It would certainly give the patients assurance that we weren't going to pull out of Quang Ngai again. By the time Lou and I came back to open up the center at 8:30 or so, all the American nurses and doctors were on the job handling the continual flow of casualties and even some of the Vietnamese nurses were beginning to move. Only four of our twenty prosthetic trainees showed up for work, so we decided to close up at noon but I had treated most of my patients by then anyway.

One of the haunting memories that I will carry with me all my life...As I sit here on the porch of Pixton Hall writing in my journal I can see the feet and legs of a Viet Cong body. He is lying in the 100 degree sun of the afternoon, tied hand and foot to a bamboo pole. Just the way he was carried in and dumped this morning right in front of our gate. He stares in passionless silence, hands open as if appealing for help he knows will not come. His body is beginning to swell and swarm with flies. Just fifty feet up the road is a dead woman...also presumably a Viet Cong. She has been pretty...long black hair, neatly braided...seemingly asleep by the side of the road. They have been put there as psychological warfare. A warning to all who contemplate casting their lot with the NFL forces. A repulsive, sickening and heartbreaking monument to what war can do to decent men. That men, any men, could do this loathsome sort of thing to each other is difficult to comprehend, but they do...and all sides are guilty. War is a sickness and all participants suffer the same symptoms. War attacks the human soul indiscriminately and everyone loses.)

So much for the August journal entries...I describe the attack of August 23rd in detail just to give you all a graphic picture of what it is like at such times. Since then we have had four, maybe five, attacks that could be considered major ones but none quite as determined as the first one.

Our Quaker team here in Quang Ngai is now up to full strength. There are eight of us and that is the total number planned on until the military situation changes radically for the better. I'll give you the break-down of our team so that you will know who the people are that I talk about in the newsletters. Jack Richards is the team leader and his wife, Jill, is social worker--director of household affairs--general assistant--and light-of-our-lives. Lou Kubicka is one of our two generalists who does all our construction, electrical and plumbing work and supervises our Vietnamese contractor and his crew. Eric Wright is the other generalist and works a great deal with the Child Day Care Center, along with Jill and Xuan Lan, the Vietnamese directress. "Rick" has surprised us all with his creative and ambitious additions to the CDCC program. He also is our roving representative and makes frequent trips to Saigon and Da Nang to meet supplies, arrange for air tickets and visa renewals, interview prospective employees, etc. Joe Clark, our prosthetist, has just returned to us much to our delight and relief. Trying to carry on a prosthetic program without a prosthetist is quite a feat! Keith Brinton functions as a generalist-interpreter-administrative assistant and part time "court jester". (grin) Marge Nelson is on the job as our doctor. Just keeping the team healthy takes a good bit of her time but she also serves the rehab. center patients, the prison (for NFL political prisoners) and the Child Day Care Center! And if we know Margy, she is going to soon have her fingers in other community medical problems! And then there's me...most of my time I try to avoid anything called work...and when I can't avoid it, I can be found in the physical therapy part of the rehab. center getting the amputees ready for

prosthetic fittings and giving gait training and wound care.

Since our team size has had to be cut, our program at the rehab. center is also limited. We are now carrying out a prosthetic program with its physical therapy component. With a few exceptions we are handling amputees only. This is one of the hardest tasks we all face over here...telling the non-amputee patients that we just don't have time to take care of them. Watching them leave in disbelief; knowing how badly they need medical and physical therapy care; knowing with certainty that they will be badly and unnecessarily handicapped without that care. Knowing that some of them will die from medical neglect.

We are carrying on the training aspect of our work in as much as we can with the given military situation. Joe still has his twenty prosthetic trainees and this course can go on pretty much as usual, although we have had two of our boys wounded and there are times when they either can't get into work or home from work because of the danger of injury or being conscripted by the NFL forces hiding out around their homes. Two weeks ago I hired my first Physical Therapy Aide trainee. There is no question of being able to conduct any sort of formal training at this time but Anh Thien will be given on the job training as my counterpart in as much depth as I can possibly manage. If there is time for any didactic work (and I think there will be some opportunity) we will work that in. If he can hang onto him for a year and he isn't drafted, killed or disappears, I think he will be a competent P.T. aide. Any formal classroom training of P.T. aides, O.T. aides, or nurses in rehabilitation must await more peaceful times and the enlargement of our team.

There is so very much more I want to say to you but I can't make this any longer. It will cost a fortune for Mom to send out now. Perhaps the answer is to write more often but I can't see that happening. (grin) I think of each of you often and wish I had the time to write personally, but it just doesn't exist. I really want to hear from you, though, and I will try to acknowledge each letter with a least a short note. That's kind of a one-sided arrangement, isn't it? (grin)

All of us here in Quang Ngai are well, thriving and very glad we are the ones lucky enough to be back working here. If the old saying, "Home is where the heart is" is true, we are indeed all "home". Please keep doing everything possible to end this unforgivable war and help us constantly remind the people back in the states that the people of Vietnam are still dying...And they keep right on dying while so-called peace talks drone on into infinity in Paris with no results. While our leaders "save face" the people of Vietnam are losing their lives.

My very best wishes and love to you all,

Dot

Dot Weller