

Sunday March 16

Dearest Mom &amp; Dad,

I sincerely hope you received my cable of yesterday & have known for several days now we are safe & well. None of my last week's letters got out of Kontum, probably just as well as our situation changed so much since then. I probably won't write to anyone else for a few days, so I'd appreciate your sharing this with those you feel appropriate & passing on word of our whereabouts to any who should ask. However, I feel any news to KHF should come from Pat instead of me.

Since you know we are safe, I hope my description of this week's events is not overly upsetting or alarming. It's been another example of the fact there's always some good mixed in with the bad. Last Sunday (it feels like a year ago, not just one week!) Ed Tolle, our USAID representative came by the compound & warned Pat the situation in the Highlands seemed to be deteriorating. He asked us all to have an evacuation bag ready with essential papers & belongings, something we've all had since before Tet. Monday AM the Kontum police chief came out to Minh-Quy & told us Ban Me Thuot had fallen & that he & his family were leaving immediately. By Mon. midafternoon Kontum City was deserted, not a shop was open. The road to our compound was jammed with people trying to get to the bank across the street prior to leaving town. Tuesday Pat asked the CARE nurses & Barb Svetlik, who supports an aged mother, if they would leave on the courier Wednesday, taking Det & Wir with them. Dr. Tolle was so anxious to get them out, he got a special plane sent up Tuesday & John Havican left also for a quick trip to check on his wife in Nha Trang & scrounge supplies for us. (Phyllis had left Monday on a previously scheduled trip to take a patient to Nha Trang & Montagnard students to Saigon. When she left she said she doubted if she'd be able to return.) Wednesday Dr. Lussier left - he has a wife & child, & has been extremely nervous about the war. By this time we were getting short of supplies, as we've been cut off by road from Qui Nhon since March 4. The whole town was becoming worried about lack of food (or I should say those who stayed - all who could afford it had already got to Pleiku to try to get a ride on Air Vietnam. The air ticket price Pleiku to Saigon jumped from 4 to 30,000 piasters overnight.) The boarding school decided it was time to send their students home, but the Ban Me Thuot - Dar Lac kids couldn't get off of course, & when they tried to send the Phu Bon students home, we realized that had fallen also, without a fight. By then we knew there were ten missionaries, mainly Christian Missionary Alliance, stranded in Ban Me Thuot with two NVA tanks parked outside their compound. That afternoon an Air Vietnam plane was shot down outside of Pleiku killing all passengers. Thursday we learned one of them was Mac of the New Zealand Red Cross Team, Pleiku. They've been extremely good friends to Minh-Quy, providing us with supplies, hospitality, & we generally got together every week or two. The New Zealand embassy ordered all their people out but Marion & Ed decided they would stay anyway. Pleiku was being regularly rocketed, but Kontum just had occasional harassment type incoming maybe two or three times a day. We still felt no great personal danger, but to be safe, Senia & her two kids left for Saigon along with Dr. Connolly who was ordered to leave by CARE. I can see how disorganized my mind is. Tuesday we all moved out to the hospital to (1) keep us all together in case of evacuation; (2) keep us from having to drive by the airport so often as that's where some of the rockets were aimed & (3) the hospital was really safer since the main rocketing was aimed in town. Things were cramped at the hospital but by Thursday night we only had three doctors, three nurses & a great feeling of closeness & camaraderie had developed. But Friday was bleak. John arrived back from Saigon. He'd found his wife safe but Kerry, who headed the pig project & has been a good friend to us all, was not as lucky. His wife is Montagnard & they've been working on getting her out of the country. They need one last paper, & she had gone to Ban Me Thuot to get it. No one has heard from or of her since, & Kerry is sick with grief. Friday afternoon we learned that in the fall of Phu Bon Father Dijon had been captured - his seventh time. Then, worse news. A French priest had escaped from Ban Me Thuot & walked the 45 km to Pleiku. He was nearly out of his mind when he arrived & told of what happened there. The NVA ran their tanks through the streets & slaughtered, he said, thou-

sands & thousands of people. Both Phu Bon & Ban Me Thuot are resettlement areas for Kontum's (Province) Montagnards, & by then we realized the situation looked grim. The ARVN are either running away or they're so disorganized they can't defend their areas. Either way, the NVA are going through and killing people en masse. Friday night all electricity in Kontum & the military compound was discontinued permanently (it was already down to 12 hours a day) & to avoid being the only lighted target, Minh-Quy discontinued its generator also except for AM hours for the x-ray use. We sat in the dark & listened to the VOA & BBC news & realized the end was coming. 10 PM Friday night Pat came in our room & talked for a few minutes & then on the way out said we'd be leaving on Monday's courier. We agreed & no one said much more that night (see letter #2)

(Please remember Peggy is just telling what was told to her - probably exaggerated. First letter arrived 3-22-75, letter #2 3-27-75 with a third one)  
#2

Dear Mom & Dad,

Hope these letters reach you the same day! Anyway, to continue! Friday night was by far the most incoming we've had, & each rocket was answered with a barrage of outgoing. The outgoing base is very close to the hospital, so it was extremely noisy. No rockets came close to us, but with all the noise & tension we slept almost not at all. At one point Mary, Marion, Pat & I all went out on the veranda type area & watched the glare over the town as something burned. Everyone was silent, lost in his own thoughts. Sat. AM George Christian & Ed Baker told us they would not be leaving. They both want to stay & try to work with the other side. In some ways I admire them. Neither have family, & both love the Montagnards. But I don't know how realistic they are. We got in some casualties from a village just south of town. The VC had ambushed it during the night, killing 5, wounding several others. Around noon a messenger came to the hospital looking for John. He was out trying to buy rice, & I decided that despite my qualms about reading other people's mail, I'd look at his message, which was fortunate. We were to send a representative down to the USAID compound immediately as evacuation was to be that afternoon. Pat & Marion dashed off while I started one last IV - on a Vietnamese, ironically, & Mary went through a few more supplies. Pat & Marion dashed back & we learned we had 10 min. to get to the airport, so we grabbed our bags (my little carry on) & ran for the jeep to begin the horrible round of good-byes. George & Ed were in the operating room & wouldn't come still. But the sisters & staff & patients all came & many openly wept along with us. These people have suffered so much but they still thanked us for coming, & as we drove off, Sr. Vincent called "Go in peace." It was difficult for me, a newcomer, how much more so for Marion, & most of all for Pat. At the airfield Dr. Tolle drove up with a last minute message - military headquarters in Pleiku was being abandoned, which means almost surely the whole Highlands is being abandoned. The Volpar that was to take us to Qui Nhon dashed down to Pleiku for refueling so we had to wait in the bunker for its return. Pat relived the terror of '72 with the rockets coming in, but fortunately that was not the case this time. Still when the Volpar landed we dashed on with our bags within about one minute & were off. As we looked down we could see the land surrounding Kontum filled with tanks & troops. Our hope now is that Kontum will topple without a fight. It appears nothing but a miracle could save it from the NVA, & why should all those people die trying?

So yesterday we landed in Qui Nhon, Pat, Marion, Mary, & I, & a more motley crew you won't find anywhere. But the reception we've been given has been the one good part of this whole week - people have been marvelous. The New Zealand surgical team at Qui Nhon put us up for the night, gave us beds, food, shower facilities, took us to the sea for a swim. Both the province hospital & Holy Family donated much needed lactated ringers solution, & many offered to give blood, but we weren't sure enough about airlifts to make this practical. Mass at Holy Family included prayers for the victims of war. The Qui

Nhon USAID representative organized an Air America C 47 to take us to Nha Trang this AM so Pat could be with Det & Wir, & there had been collected oxygen, more IV solution, & boxes of meds & dressings. It turns out it all had to be dropped from a low altitude as the plane couldn't land, but we hope some is usable. Then Nha Trang USAID got us a Volpar to Saigon, where Barb Swetlik's friends, CARE, & the Summer Institute of Linguistics are putting us up royally. On the hope that maybe we can return to Kontum, most of us will stick around Saigon for a few weeks, hopefully finding work somewhere. I'll probably try a child welfare-relocation center, or possibly the CRS orphanage. All I really want is room & board. Then if things still look bleak, I'll probably come home, probably via the Orient rather than Europe. I haven't actually talked with CRS, but think it's okay to use their address for mail. Could you please let Larry & Sheryl know what's happened here, also? Barb Swetlik tried calling her folks in New York (they had to talk through the operator, not very satisfactory so I won't try) & the news they'd had of the Highlands was exaggerated & alarming, so I'd like Larry & Sheryl, too, to know all is well. I wish we knew how Ed & George were, but they're doing what they want most, anyway.

It seems likely I'll see you much sooner than planned, although anything is possible at this point. Anyway, I hope my being here has not been too worrisome for you. This certainly wasn't how I thought it would turn out, & yet it's been a valuable experience anyway. Seeing the efforts people have made to help Minh-Quy & Minh-Quy staff (in particular the pilots who flew us out, flew supplies in) makes me proud to be a fellow member of the human race.

Now my 2nd hot shower of the day & bed.

Love & Mizpah, Peg.

Thurs. Mar. 20

Dear Mom & Dad,

This is certainly the nicest way to be refugees - we're staying in a deluxe apartment, have been swimming in a private pool, wining & dining with people from the Australian & New Zealand embassies, & the three gals whose clothing size matches mine have excellent taste, so I've probably never been quite so well dressed! I can't remember what all I wrote in my last letter, nor what I said over the phone, so I'll try to start over with a little explanation of what's going on here.

Last Saturday when we hurriedly left Kontum our plan was to sit out the offensive in Saigon & then if possible return to Kontum, & also hopefully find a place to set up medical care for evacuated Montagnards. We rapidly found that there's no hope of returning to Kontum in the near future. Our refugee plans are still very much unsettled. There are some refugees from Phuoc Long (the province taken two months ago) in an area called Vienz Tao, about one hour drive from Saigon, but there's some question of how secure that particular area is. As for other refugees from the Highlands, as unbelievable as it sounds, the VN government is officially denying anything has happened, therefore, there can be no refugees. But there are reports on BBC, VOA & the Philippine news of a stream of refugees 60 miles long coming from Pleiku & Kontum, moving toward Qui-Nhon. Since all roads are cut, travel is through the forests & plains, & the VC are reportedly shooting the refugees who wander into the Phu Bon area by mistake. Barb Swetlik, one of the Minh-Quy nurses, worked in Saigon for 2 years before coming to Kontum, & really knows her way around the volunteer agencies, so she & Dr. John Connolly are working on coordinating all Volunteer efforts directed toward the Montagnards. So far it's hard to get people to commit themselves or supplies, as the situation right in Saigon is quite tense, & it seems we may be leaving the country soon. Once again, we're watching the situation closely, & will leave in plenty of time to be safe, & I won't go out to any refugee areas not considered secure, so don't worry about my being here. Actually, to fill in the time till we get a refugee program going, I'm starting volunteer work tomorrow at the Holt infant center - approximately 120 orphans under 6 months of age to love. They



only have two RN's on at a time, all the rest are on-the-job-trained aides so they seemed anxious for me to come back tomorrow. The babies are terribly malnourished (there's another home for the well ones & many have upper respiratory infections, diarrhea, skin infections, & yet they're beautifully cared for, everything is spotlessly clean. It felt so good to hold some of them today, & yet I kept thinking how well taken care of they were in comparison to our Montagnards. I hope so much we can get a program going before the whole country tumbles!

Our plans for our return trip have changed a little (& we have no dates set, may be soon, may not be till next year). If we do leave soon enough that the Europe trip with Cheryl is out (& that appears likely) we plan on coming back to the U.S. as escorts for some of the orphans to be adopted. With the many Americans leaving VN right now, there may be no need of this, but we plan to volunteer anyway. What we'd like most to do would be to get a multiple entry visa, fly to Bangkok & then to Panang (Malaysia) for a beach vacation, & then return to Saigon & pick up an armful of kids. ;If we can't get the re-entry visa, we'll forgo the Bangkok-Panang trip if escorts are needed, as I think every child with a chance to be adopted should have the opportunity to leave. Besides, what an adventure!

Barb has been just great about showing us around Saigon, introducing us to her friends, & I'm really enjoying my stay here. Outgoing mail leaves only twice a week now, so I suppose this'll take a long time to reach you, but happy belated birthday, Mom! It was so good to talk to you Tuesday (Monday Seattle time) wish you could have been there too Dad. Say hello to all our friends, I'm way behind on letters.

Love,

Peg.

*Letter #2 finally arrived 3-27 along with a third.*