

SAIGON DIARY

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I guess I went to Saigon because it was preferable to returning to Wellington in July. I thought, after spending two years at our Embassy in Bangkok, and loving the climate and way of life there, it might be better to cope with a war situation in Vietnam than struggle with winter in New Zealand

Early in 1965, we had had a female Charge d'Affaires, Natalie England, in Saigon. But a bomb explosion on the floor above the New Zealand Embassy, which was then situated in the Caravelle Hotel, left Natalie, uninjured but badly shaken. At that point Prime Minister Keith Holyoake, who also held the External Affairs portfolio, decided to place an embargo on women being posted there. In Bangkok I came in contact with secretaries, on leave, who were stationed in Saigon, and whilst they admitted it was difficult, they seemed to find it rewarding. In fact the American military presence had been escalating steadily since the Caravelle bomb incident and it seemed less and less likely that the Viet Cong would be active in the city.

Our Ambassador to Thailand, Major-General Sir Stephen Weir, was accredited to Vietnam, so I had a fair idea of the situation in that country. Sir Stephen, a military man, was, naturally, deeply interested in Vietnam, and made regular visits to Saigon for briefings and a chance to keep in direct touch with the progress of the war. The Americans were always more than happy to see him and keep him up to date. He would arrive back in Bangkok with swags of drafts which needed to be turned into reports for Wellington and it annoyed him that because we had no secretarial staff in Saigon they couldn't be done there.

So when, nearing the end of my term in Thailand, a memo arrived for me from Wellington asking if I had any preferences about future postings I jotted down several nice places in Europe and elsewhere and, as an after thought, suggested that if ever they decided to send a secretary to Saigon I might be interested. Shortly afterwards a telegram arrived asking if I was serious about this, and if I was, it was proposed to ask the Prime Minister to reverse his earlier decision about women in Saigon. I discussed the idea with Sir Stephen and he didn't seem to think I'd be in too much danger, and felt that if I was prepared to put up with rather difficult living conditions, I should accept the posting. Someone in the Department must have persuaded the Prime Minister I was not likely to go to pieces in Saigon and he gave his approval to a two year posting.

So here I was on 28 June 1966, arriving at Tan Son Nhut airport on a Cathay flight from Hong Kong after taking some leave in New Zealand, and hoping I'd not have cause for regret. My parents, of course, were horrified at my decision and thought I was mad. I hoped they wouldn't be proved correct.

The approach to the civilian terminal was extraordinary – we taxied for miles past rows and rows of bunkers accommodating US military aircraft and equipment and whatever doubts I'd ever had about how deeply the US was involved in the war, were laid to rest. Civilian aircraft i.e. Air France, Cathay, Thai International, etc shared the runways with the military and at that time, apparently, Tan Son Nhut was the busiest airport in the world. It was nerve wracking flying in or out of there, particularly when, on an inward flight, because military aircraft took precedence over civilian aircraft, we would join the stack and circle for long periods waiting for a landing space – often in dense cloud, which was worse in the monsoon season, or in dense smog from the vast number of jet aircraft using the airspace. I don't recall any major incidents, but then we probably wouldn't have known anyway – the news black out was highly efficient.

I was met at the airport by Merv Wake, who was attached to the Embassy on secondment from the NZ Army as a "man of all trades" and who, after a short period, I was supposed to replace as a "woman of all trades". My appointment was as secretary, accounts clerk, and consular and administration officer and I was given some minimal training in the latter areas before leaving Wellington. Merv had been there since August 1965 and he and Arthur Pope, the Charge d'Affaires, made up the sum total of the home-based Embassy staff. A Vietnamese driver, Ngan, was employed as the Charge's chauffeur and there was a young male messenger

who careened around Saigon on a bicycle. He travelled faster on the bike by dodging in and out of traffic than any car or taxi. A receptionist, Janine Pagot, whose knowledge of French and Vietnamese was invaluable to us all, completed the local staff complement.

I soon discovered that local Embassy staff numbers were minimal because if they **were** locals, they could also very well be Viet Cong and as such were security risks. This of course meant that either Arthur, Merv or myself were involved in duties normally done by local staff.

Prior to my arrival it had been decided that I should stay in the Embassy for a week or so before moving into a hotel and then, ultimately, if I could find any, into my own accommodation. This, I gathered, was going to be extremely difficult because there were vast numbers of Americans, and others, in Vietnam, not just for military purposes but for entrepreneurial and construction projects and of course hoards of media people from all parts of the world were stationed there as well. There were huge numbers of staff attached to the American Embassy, the USIS, USAID, JUSPAO, JUSMAC, etc and to the large number of Embassies in Saigon. In addition there were three contingents of observers from India, Canada and Poland who were attached to the ICC (International Control Commission). They were there to monitor the truce which had been formalised between North and South Vietnam some years before but which the Viet Cong obviously didn't respect. So with all these people to be housed, suitable accommodation was extremely difficult to find and anything reasonable was snapped up immediately. I heard very early on about people who had stayed in hotels for weeks and even months before finding adequate housing.

Our Embassy was a pleasant modern house in a tree-lined cul-de-sac immediately over the road from US Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge's residence. The open end of the street was guarded by US military police. The other end was closed by an extremely high concrete wall beyond which was a busy street and beyond that again a cemetery. We did wonder how safe we were there and if, in the event of a mortar attack on the US residence, which could easily have been mounted from the cemetery, we might not end up in the firing line by default. Mortars had been set up there on one occasion and fired, but the terrorists were either bad shots or they were aiming somewhere else and, thankfully, we weren't ever on the receiving end of mortar fire. When an American VIP visited the US Ambassador, and this happened frequently, their security measures became extremely tight and our Embassy staff, who were well-known to the guards on duty, were stopped and our identities checked thoroughly as if we were a likely threat. It annoyed us intensely.

The Embassy was a combined chancery and residence and was set in a garden of exotic tropical plants, and lots of frangipani and palms. The ground floor comprised a good sized reception/ lounge/dining area with doors opening onto a wide patio, - this area was used as a reception area for Embassy functions - a kitchen and storage space. Servants quarters were behind the house in the small enclosed garden. The house then ascended to five levels in all, with mezzanine floors, small staircases, a spiral wrought iron staircase and bedrooms and bathrooms, which were used as offices. The Charge had living quarters on the top floor. A suite on the first floor, comprising bedroom and bathroom which was used by the Ambassador on his visits from Bangkok and by any other VIP who might wish to stay for a night or two was where I - without the VIP status - was to stay. The house was owned by a Vietnamese gentleman and a condition for leasing it was that rent should be paid a year in advance - in Paris. So much for **his** confidence in the outcome of the war.

I couldn't believe it when I first inspected what was to be my office. It had been a bedroom, on the first level. The Saigon office was, at that time, financed by the Bangkok Embassy travel vote so the budget was frugal. I don't know the reason for that. It was probably a case of the place growing, a bit like Topsy, or it may have been that no one wanted to acknowledge we had an Embassy in Saigon. My office was probably about 10ft x 10ft, my desk was a bedroom dressing table about 18" wide and perhaps 5ft long complete with mirror and drawers. My chair was a wooden kitchen one with a pillow to make it slightly more comfortable - at least the bed had been removed! My typewriter was a portable one which Merv had somehow acquired, on loan, from the NZ Army HQ in Saigon, and that was it. Merv's office, next door, was similarly

unequipped but he did have a filing cabinet! I don't remember much about Arthur's office, but I do know that apart from a desk and a chair he had nothing else. Not even provision for his visitors to sit down. We had no safe, no gestetner, and very little in the way of office supplies, so a long list of our needs went off to the Bangkok Embassy. We had no decent telephone system, and certainly no phone books. Service through the Vietnamese telephone exchange was abysmal and if it hadn't been for the American military, who had set up their own exchanges and telephone system, we would have had great difficulty as the number of staff, and the work of the Embassy increased over the next eighteen months or so. We obtained, through the good will of the Americans and at no cost to the Embassy, a couple of additional lines linked to one of their exchanges which rejoiced in the names of Tiger, Deer, Lion etc, and were even able to make long-distance calls, when necessary. There was no such thing as an immediate connection though, and it could be a case of waiting for hours or even until the next day before a connection could be made and even then you could find yourself on the end of an extremely unstable line. A good deal of patience, a sense of humour and a calm acceptance of what would be would be was required – and not just with the telephone system either! We did find that a woman dealing with the American GI telephone operators stood a far better chance of getting a connection than the men. I wonder why?

I decided that my number one priority was to get a proper typewriter and to my amazement, discovered that it was possible to obtain an IBM electric typewriter locally. The wait for delivery wasn't going to be excessive, but there was a bit of a concern because the power supply in Saigon was anything but reliable. In addition to power cuts, there were also "brown outs" when the voltage dropped to disturbingly low levels, and, by contrast, there were occasional powerful surges which meant a possibility of damage to the typewriter. But I decided to put the difficulties aside and work on the knowledge that at least when the power **was** working, I'd be able to get something done. I remember that Arthur worried constantly about the possibility of his very expensive stereo system being irreparably damaged. The air conditioners were, in never really of much benefit – they seemed to produce only a minimal amount of half-cooled air and that even before we had more staff and thus more air conditioners. At one point further into my posting, we had to have eight air-conditioners running from one small domestic-type lead and of course there wasn't sufficient for all. Tests of the voltage showed that there was as little as 156 volts going into 220 volt machines – and Wellington wondered why our air conditioners burned out regularly. Ceiling fans and open windows were sometimes better options. But with temperatures mostly in the mid 30s, you had to face up to the fact that there wasn't going to be any let up and that you'd better learn to live with whatever cooled the air best at the time. Thankfully our cooking and hot water heating appliances were run off large gas cylinders and the supply of these was pretty reliable.

It was obvious almost immediately that Wellington had no conception of every day working conditions in Saigon. Arthur was pretty brassed off at the lack of support and provision for a proper office set-up. As I mentioned before our level of security was zero. Our code books and anything else which needed to be secure was kept in the Australian Embassy safe and to code or decode a telegram meant a trip by car which could take anything from thirty to fifty minutes, depending on the traffic jams, to bring the books back to our office. Goodness knows what would have happened to New Zealand's security if there had ever been an attack or an ambush or any disturbance on the route and the books had fallen into the wrong hands. After the laborious business of encrypting or decrypting a telegram the books had to be returned to the Australian Embassy, if they weren't closed by then that is. I don't mind admitting, the code books spent many a night under my pillows when I finally moved into my small house, and it was either too late, the thought of negotiating those streets again was too much, or the one car the Embassy possessed was in use elsewhere.

I think originally Saigon had a population of 800,000 or so but this had swelled to millions. Just how many millions it was impossible to tell although a figure of 3 million was often mentioned. So to go anywhere meant spending endless time sitting in a car trapped amidst the horrendous traffic jams which filled the city. The streets were never designed for army convoys nor for the masses of extra people. Traffic rules were non-existent, and the air was thick with diesel fumes from the large numbers of American military trucks, and emissions from the dozens and dozens of motor scooters and poorly serviced vehicles which crammed the

narrow streets. Greenpeace, had it been active in the area, would have had a ball, but they would also have made no impact whatsoever. The Embassy car was not air conditioned, and there was a certain reluctance to have the car windows down because in addition to being subjected to the stifling pollution, there had occasionally been a hand-grenade dropped into a car by a passing motor cyclist hell bent on destruction.

Incidentally, and to the never-ending amusement of the Vietnamese, the car number-plate was NG0000. The Vietnamese motor registration people had decided to renumber diplomatic cars and our car arrived at just the right time to be first in the new registration queue. They claimed that the numbers had to begin somewhere so why not with 0000?

It didn't take me long to work out that this Embassy would go nowhere without more staff. The work load was heavy, largely because everything seemed to be complicated by red tape and the bureaucracy attached to anything you wanted to do with the Vietnamese was difficult, to say the least. There was a 13-person surgical team stationed in Qui Nhon and their administrative support was the responsibility of the Embassy. There were staff change-overs constantly in progress (the tour of duty was six months), so a large amount of our time was spent at the airport (a "no go" area for local staff), either meeting new team members or collecting their unaccompanied baggage. The new arrivals needed to be taken to various offices in Saigon to obtain USAID ID cards, travel warrants for use on American aircraft etc., and for briefings about service in Vietnam. We arranged R & R away from Vietnam, made salary payments, liaised with the US authorities regarding their immediate support in Qui Nhon by the Americans there, kept Wellington informed about their activities and requirements and generally looked after their needs.

In addition to the surgical team there were other New Zealanders in Vietnam involved in Aid programmes and there were many Colombo Plan students from Vietnam sent to study in New Zealand. Their selection and arrangements for their travel were organised by the Embassy. We were inundated with visitors – MPs, RSA delegations, anyone who thought they might need to know about the war or thought they could contribute usefully to what was going on in Vietnam turned up on our doorstep. Peter Arnett, Nick Turner, Derek Round, were just a few of the media people who dropped in frequently.

The usual hours of work for Embassies in Saigon, were 8 am to 2 30 pm but we didn't find these hours convenient. The local people had a long siesta in the middle of the day and we felt it was better to fit in with their pattern so settled for a long lunch break and made up the time at the end of the day. Set hours didn't work very well, and we worked as required to get through what needed to be done. In our extended lunch hour we often took ourselves off to the Cercle Sportif, a very attractive club in an imposing white building with wide verandahs and large high ceilinged rooms. It was cool, and restful and surrounded by tall shady trees and green lawns. This club was typical of those found in most Asian countries with a colonial history and was a favourite gathering place for expatriates confined to Saigon. Despite the war, the Cercle Sportif maintained a remarkable level of normality with white coated stewards quietly serving food and drinks to club members as they reclined in comfy rattan chairs and enjoyed the cool air stirred by the numerous ceiling fans circling overhead. It provided an enjoyable and relaxing interlude in the midst of chaos. We would order lunch beside the pool, have a pleasant dip and return to the office fit for the afternoon fray.

Meantime I had begun house-hunting and it was not pleasant. I saw some impossible places for which exorbitant rents were asked. Ideally, I needed a place close to the Embassy because, although by this stage I had temporary transport, I was uncertain how long I would be able to keep it. The need to be within walking distance of the office limited the choice enormously. Because taxis and public transport in Saigon were not recommended, I had asked if the car I owned in Bangkok could be transferred with my belongings to Saigon. NZ Air Force Bristol Freighters brought in supplies from Singapore, and were bringing in my personal effects and, because there was an element of doubt about long-term safety in Saigon, I didn't want to buy a new car there. Losing a dinner set and a few pots and pans and linen and a bit of clothing was one thing, but losing a new car was not on, even if that had been possible to buy one and it probably wasn't! I never bothered to inquire. However, the people in Wellington didn't agree to my car being transferred,

although staff arriving later, and following a visit by an Inspection Team who saw first hand how difficult living in Saigon was, were allowed that privilege.

On arrival at the Embassy, I had noticed a small blue right-hand drive Volkswagen parked in the driveway and after a day or two when no one appeared to be driving it, asked who owned it. It belonged to Frank Charlton, an English-language professor on a Colombo Plan assignment with Saigon University and he had bought the car to take back to NZ. Frank was currently on leave in Hong Kong, but apparently, once he had acquired the car, he was too afraid to drive it in the teeming masses of traffic in Saigon, so had parked it at the Embassy for safekeeping. It wouldn't have helped either, that the Vietnamese drove on the right hand side of the road. When Frank returned from Hong Kong and realised I didn't mind driving in a crowded Asian city he suggested I might like to use the car and keep it run in and serviced for him. I thanked my lucky stars for the years of driving in Malaysia, Singapore, the US and Thailand which had prepared me well for anything Vietnam might throw at me. He did at one point, decide he might like to have the car back and took a young Vietnamese who claimed to be a "chauffeur" out on a trial run. Frank arrived back at the Embassy shaken and ashen and that was the last we heard of him taking over the car.

Frank, who loved France and spoke French well, had come to Saigon in the belief that it was the "Paris of the Orient". It might have been at one point, but he received a rude shock which he never quite got over, once the reality dawned. There were vestiges, however, of a truly beautiful city. People we talked to who had known it in French Colonial times, spoke of it, and the whole country, as being incomparably beautiful and it wasn't difficult to imagine. Providing one didn't lower ones eyes to street level it was possible to pretend that the roads and side walks weren't filthy and pot holed and crowded and to see only the wonderful large old villas and the remnants of what had once been well-tended gardens filled with frangipani, gardenias, crotons and palms, and to appreciate the way tall trees in some streets, still met in an archway above providing welcome shade beneath.

The fabled Continental Palace hotel with its wide verandahs and lazily turning ceiling fans must have been an idyllic spot to sit and while away the evening hours and watch the world go by. Now there was the constant fear that someone careering past on a motor cycle would lob a hand-grenade into the area. I understand, after we left, that they glassed in the verandah as a safety measure, but it would have destroyed the ambience completely. Sadly, many of the trees lining the streets of the city were gone to make way for wider roads. The road from the airport into the city was a good example of the carnage. But there were still some wide tree-lined boulevards winding down into the city, past the Embassies of the United States and Great Britain, past the beautiful twin-spired Cathedral and the Presidential Palace but most came to an end at the river, which wound its way through Saigon. This was a river which might have had its charms once, but I have my doubts. It was muddy, heavily polluted, and crowded with all manner of craft, and flotsam and jetsam. The other side of the river was supposedly unsafe. I remember venturing out to a restaurant "over the bridge" one night - a great place with superb food - but I must say I wasn't all that relaxed about being in an area vulnerable to Viet Cong infiltration or attack.

While the house hunting went on I moved from the Embassy into a downtown hotel. My room was on the fourth floor. The lift in the hotel had never, and was never likely to work, and it was a bit of an anti-climax climbing the stairs, in the heat at the end of a tiring day. There was also no air conditioning because, we gathered, the management had failed to come up with the bribe required for the separate electricity connection to operate the lifts and air conditioning. There was a fan, however, and I would leave my windows open to get even the slightest breath of air. The noise from the streets was indescribable, but thankfully there was a curfew which varied a bit, but was generally somewhere between 9.00 pm to 5.00 am. This meant there was a blessed calm during those hours when, apart from military patrols, the streets were deserted and you could hope for a reasonable sleep until the cacophony began again at 5.00 am. The silence, did, however, mean that I became very much aware of the sound of artillery and mortar fire and the crump of bombs exploding in the countryside, the latter from the B47's which carried out regular saturation bombing missions over much of South Vietnam. There was also the occasional spate of small arms fire,

goodness knows why or from where. In addition to its other problems, the hotel had no dining room and if I needed a proper meal I had to go out again and find a restaurant. Given that the restaurants were generally filled with American servicemen and others out for a good time and living life to the full, it wasn't something I relished doing on my own. Merv, who was living in a US army billet – one of many large hotels in use by the American military – often asked me to join him for dinner in the restaurant of his hotel and I very happily accepted. Apart from not having to trek around and find a suitable place to eat, the food in the American billets was extremely good. The array was amazing. You name it they had it. In addition, there was generally a band or a floor-show. This was the easy part of the war.

I coped with the difficult meal arrangements with the help of dinner and cocktail party invitations from staff in other Embassies, banks, and the business community as well as those from the very socially active Canadian ICC team. (They were great on champagne breakfasts!) Failing all else, a plate of sandwiches could be obtained through "room service" if one was prepared to wait for a long time and providing one always wanted chicken sandwiches!

A feature of Saigon living was weevils in food. The first morning I was there and having breakfast at the Embassy, I noticed small black dots in the French bread which had been cut up and placed in a basket along with the obligatory croissants. Arthur wasn't down for breakfast at that point so I steered clear of the dotted bread and ate other things. But when Arthur did appear, he casually came out with "Oh yes, I should mention that you have to pick the weevils out of the bread" and then proceeded to line them up around his plate as he ate. This was amazing, because Arthur was very particular about food. I came to the conclusion that weevils couldn't be all bad, and that like a lot of things in Saigon you had to learn to live with and even grin and bear them!

The house-hunting continued and amazingly, within about three weeks, I found a place that, with certain additions, I could live in. The horror was that the landlord – a Vietnamese ex civil servant - required the equivalent of around \$NZ350 a month rent. This when a good apartment in Wellington would have cost about \$90 a month. The house was a not very large oblong divided in half down the middle. One side was the living area with a small pantry behind a partition at one end, containing a handbasin, a very old fridge and a small bench. The other half comprised two interconnecting rooms – bedrooms - and a bathroom and toilet at the back. Because the house adjoined another, the centre bedroom, had no window so in effect could only be used as a storeroom. The bathroom had a shower rosette poking out of one wall and the tiled floor had a drainage hole in one corner. No need for, in fact nowhere for, a shower curtain. The toilet was beyond the shower, so it was necessary, if one had recently showered, to negotiate a wet slippery floor to get to it. The floor of the rest of the house was tiled in a traditional pattern in white, red and green so at least it was cool. There was no hot water and cold water had to be pumped up each morning, by the servant, into a tank in the ceiling. Cooking was done outside in the servants quarters at the back of the house. But there was no stove other than a small charcoal cooker. In the corner of the main bedroom, was a very heavy and ornate steel safe which the owner wished to leave in the house. It was far too heavy to move and it contained his "Service" medals from the French Colonial powers for whom he had worked for a lifetime. There was also a largish bed with a very thin mattress on wooden slats and in both bedrooms were a couple of rather rickety wardrobes. But the house was in a quiet cul-de-sac, Nguyen Thanh Y, and as I'd hoped, within walking distance of the office. Almost next door was an Australian Embassy employee and another one lived just around the corner so there was some support nearby. The garden was extremely small, but it was enclosed by a high fence and high gates which could be firmly secured. There were wrought iron grilles over the windows and there were wooden shutters to close at night as well as metal grilles to pull over the doors. All in all, once we added some barbed wire entanglement to the top of the fence and the gate, we thought it would provide a reasonably secure convenient place for me to live. So, with a certain amount of trepidation, because if we'd waited to get approval from the Department in Wellington, we'd have lost the house, we agreed to a year's lease and to pay the rent, for the whole year, in advance, in Paris. In other words, the usual arrangement! The people in Wellington, were most upset by our audacity, and threatened that the forthcoming inspection team would look very closely at our reckless behaviour!

Undaunted, we went ahead with arrangements for me to move in. But first a water heater and a stove and some furniture had to be obtained. The two items at the top of the list were ordered from Singapore and we paid a visit to a local craftsman to see if he could produce a settee a couple of arm chairs and the odd bookshelf out of local woods. Rattan, which would have been preferable, wasn't particularly good in Vietnam. However, the finished products weren't too bad at all once the cushions were covered in a nice Thai cotton I ordered from Bangkok. I don't remember how I acquired a dining table and chairs, but I ended up with a round table and enough chairs to seat eight people. To complete the furnishings there was, in the dining end of the living room, a large sideboard which, the landlord explained, was the family altar. He hoped I wouldn't mind if he left that as well. I felt sure I'd need an altar – and a safe without keys – at some time or other!

My belongings duly arrived from Bangkok and I was able to spread around some lamps and some Thai silk cushions and one or two pictures, and fill the bookshelf and the place began to look like home. Through the domestic staff at the Embassy I found a wonderful Chinese Amah, Ah Fong. She was of the traditional school, of indeterminate age, but probably in her late 40s or early 50s and wore black trousers, a white jacket and her hair was drawn back into a gleaming black knot at the base of her neck. She had a wonderful smile, lots of gold in her teeth and was a very good cook. I was extremely lucky to have her because of the shortage of good servants and I guess I must have paid accordingly although I don't remember exactly what her wages amounted to. The Americans as with everything else, had driven servant salaries right through the ceiling.

The servants quarters, a small bedroom and a washroom with a large water jar and a hole in the floor type toilet looked abysmal to our eyes, but to Ah Fong it looked pretty good. She at least had her own space and was not required to share with anyone. Many servants had their whole family residing in the often cramped servants' quarters. We found an unused mattress at the Embassy and had it brought around for her to use on the wooden platform which was, apparently, the bed. She thanked us profusely but some time later we discovered the mattress rolled up at the bottom of the bed and a flax mat laid out instead. A mattress, to her, was not necessary and she wanted no part of it, but was too polite to say so.

Fortunately, Merv, had access to the American PX and I was able to give him a shopping list for groceries etc which were not available in the local market – well they probably were available, but at black market prices. In fact, it was amazing to see just what was available on the local market. Anything and everything was sitting on the stalls in the streets acknowledged as the "black market" There were even refrigerators set up on the side-walks in which chilled goods were stored. I'm sure I remember one day, seeing Anchor butter in one of those fridges. Because all personnel, and this included troops from Australia, Korea, the Philippines, and Thailand as well as the US and New Zealand, had access to the PX, there was an amazing array of stuff moving out of there every day and a good proportion of it found its way onto the black market. The Koreans, Filipinos and Thais pooled their resources and bought large items from the PX to sell outside. I waited for Merv on many occasions outside the PX (I wasn't allowed in) and marvelled as the groups of soldiers wheeled out refrigerators, stereo gear, portable radios camera and photographic equipment and cases and cases of items which I knew very well they wouldn't be using themselves. The PX was amazing, you could buy anything – groceries, toiletries, fur coats, electrical appliances, cameras, beer, wine and spirits and even diamond rings and jewellery. I read somewhere that the Saigon PX was only slightly smaller than Bloomingdales Department store in New York. You had to hand it to the Americans, they did their very best to satisfy their military personnel by ample provision of material things. There were even car salesman in Vietnam who had set up offices so that a serviceman could order a vehicle at a large discount and take delivery of it on his arrival back in the States. I gather stock-brokers were also around to scoop up any spare cash which servicemen might want to invest. Every post was a winning post for someone.

The military authorities also provided a huge amount of entertainment. They had two or three large planes circling perpetually above Saigon transmitting TV programmes to viewers below. You could tell when a

plane was circling nearby when you'd got a clearer picture on your TV screen. I didn't have a TV set – I didn't relish the American programmes or the endless rounds of American football and baseball. There was a constant stream of live entertainers performing in both the military billets and out in the field. Reports of movie stars being seen in Saigon were quite frequent – we only ever saw one "personality", Chuck Connors, who happened to be in a restaurant down town when we arrived. Someone who saw Glen Ford on the diving board at the Cercle Sportif was deeply disappointed. Florid and paunchy and nothing like the sun tanned hero on the movie screens was the verdict. The entertainers came largely from the US, but other groups like the Maori Volcanics who were very popular in Vietnam. The amount of money spent by the Americans on entertaining their service personnel must have been astronomical, but was only a drop in the ocean compared to the money being thrown at the war as a whole. There was a frenetic night life in Saigon and the city appeared to be filled with night clubs, bars, and massage parlours that, apart from the hours of curfew, never seemed to close, even in the lunch break, and I wouldn't have minded a cent for every glass of Saigon tea that was served in Vietnam. Which brings to mind a little difficulty Frank Charlton had soon after his arrival in Saigon. He decided to have a meal out and went into a likely looking place. He sat down whereupon a waitress asked what he would like. "A menu please" said Frank in his impeccable French. A little bit of giggling went on amongst the other waitresses and he waited and waited for the menu to appear. He asked again for a menu, no luck. But he did get a Saigon tea! Finally, he left, but recounted the story to Arthur and Merv and wondered why they laughed. A place that had loads of waitresses in it, but served no food was quite beyond his comprehension – at that early stage of his posting to Vietnam anyway.

A comparison with Nero fiddling while Rome burned often came to mind. Life in Saigon was unreal and not just because of the war situation – for expats in the city there was a hectic social life. I remember going one evening to a party given by a businessman who was a member of the well-known Dupont family. It was like something out of a movie. We went through the tall gates into a lush tropical garden lit by flaming torches and complete with a pond and gold fish and water lilies in full bloom. Inside the house was a string quartet playing in one room and on the sideboard of a very comfortably furnished living room was a huge candelabra with glowing candles illuminating the scene. Champagne flowed and there was an ample supply of food served by an army of servants. Crystal glasses, fine china and candles were in abundant supply and obviously money was no object. It was a scene you'd imagine could have taken place years before in the days of French colonialism, not in the present with flares lighting up the night sky and the sound of aircraft roaring above. A couple of years ago I noticed that a Dupont, who would now be about the right age, who had been in Vietnam and who was considered to be a bit of an eccentric, had been convicted of the murder of a man in the United States. I couldn't help but wonder if this was the same man who had led a rather eccentric lifestyle in Saigon.

In retrospect, and remembering the partying that went on and how little the war was discussed, I realise how insulated we were from reality. But, in mitigation, we had little else to do outside office hours – local movie theatres were impossible, we were confined to the city for security reasons, going anywhere was unpleasant to say the least because of the hordes of people and the traffic and the dirt and the polluted atmosphere, and so entertaining or being entertained was the best way to pass the time. We became adept at scrabble and ended up with five sets which we used frequently. At the weekends, friends would come in the middle of the afternoon, play scrabble, have an early dinner, play more scrabble and leave, rather groggily, in time to beat the curfew which came into force around 9.00 pm.

Surprisingly, Saigon still had some excellent restaurants and we tried to eat out often – but it wasn't always possible to get to the restaurant of your choice. On several occasions I remember setting out for a particular place only to be defeated by traffic jams. So "The Crazy Cow" which served excellent food and was just at the end of my street and within walking distance, became a favourite eating out spot. There didn't seem to be any shortage of local fruit, vegetables, meat, chicken, fish, and other seafood. The beef was superb and we were never quite sure where it came from – it was supposedly local, but I rather doubt it. The Embassies of the US, the Australians and the Canadians had set up their own PX's but with our small staff, it wasn't feasible to do anything like that so essentials were ordered from Singapore and came in regularly on the NZ

Bristol freighters which flew in to Saigon at least once a fortnight bringing in military personnel and supplies. It was far easier, more economical and a lot easier I must admit, to shop from a catalogue in Singapore than to shop locally, always supposing the items you wanted were available in Saigon. We were lucky that the RNZAF were quite happy to transport our minimal grocery orders and that "user pays" were still unknown words in New Zealand's vocabulary. We did have a problem of getting things uplifted at the airport because there was no Vietnamese carrying company we could use. In any case they would not have been allowed access to the airport, so once again we had to rely on the American military to assist and they were always willing to help.

It was only possible to travel within Vietnam on US aircraft – either military or those operated by Air America (the CIA airline) - and with the express permission of the US authorities for official business. I managed to get to Dalat once and to Qui Nhon once and those trips, particularly the latter are another story. Other than these two trips and a short drive to relieve the boredom to nearby Bien Hoa I didn't see anything of the country at all. The road to Bien Hoa, which the Americans had built under an aid programme, but which also allowed easy access to a large air base there, was a four lane straight stretch of tar sealed highway on top of a built up levee cleared on either side of trees and bordered by rice fields, and it positively groaned with military vehicles bound to or from the air base. The trip to Bien Hoa was not repeated.

As I've already mentioned, a news blackout was in place and we heard only what the US military wished us to hear. They generally painted a rosy picture. Often the newspapers we received from New Zealand carried items of news about incidents in Saigon we had never heard of. It was only after the fall of South Vietnam and the facts began to emerge that I came to realise the full magnitude and horror of the whole sorry business and even now I am shocked to think how little we really knew about what was happening in South Vietnam. We never actually came in contact with our own troops in Vietnam, and my bet would be that they wouldn't have disclosed much even had we had the opportunity to talk with them. We did have quite a bit of contact with the Army personnel in the Saigon HQ but their situation was not a front line one.

I do remember one night, standing on the rooftop of an apartment building at a cocktail party, and marvelling again at the fact that each and every night the whole sky was lit up almost as bright as daylight by flares dropped by American aircraft to ensure that they could monitor any enemy activities or infiltration on the outskirts of the city and at the airport. Although a massive amount of money and manpower and machinery was on hand to fight this war for some reason or other I never believed that it was winnable. This could have had something to do with the fact that I had arrived in Kuala Lumpur just a few months after the Malayan Emergency had officially ended. Stories were told about the way the British had gone about defeating the communist insurgency and what went on there bore no relationship to what was happening in Vietnam. There was, too, the great difference that in Malaya, it was fairly easy to determine who the enemy might be – he or she would be bound to be Chinese. In Vietnam it could be anyone. Also the lines of supply into Malaya from China were much more convoluted whereas it was an easy matter to bring supplies into Vietnam over the northern border. And in Vietnam there were the tunnels. I don't think, at that stage, there was any idea of the extent to which the Viet Cong used these labyrinths nor of the size of them. The extent of the tunnels of Cu Chi not far from Saigon was unbelievable and the ability of the enemy all over South Vietnam, to seemingly melt away confounded the Americans completely.

During several years of living in Asia I had come to understand why communism was making such big gains. I didn't condone it, but I could understand how people could be taken in by the communist ideology of "the State will provide". If you had a guarantee of a full rice bowl, education for your children, a job, health care and security it would hardly be difficult to recruit people to the cause. Besides, in Asia, there was enormous personal wealth in the hands of an elite few and corruption was rife. Pretty galling for some little man pedalling around in a cyclo for untold hours or pushing a food cart around and making a bare subsistence living and seeing no hope of anything ever changing for him. The Vietnamese, as well, had had a history of colonisation by the French who had not treated them well at all and after the Second World War, when the Vietnamese hope that they might gain their independence didn't happen, it was hardly surprising

that what had started out as a nationalistic push for unification of North and South Vietnam and independence for the whole country, became a communist versus capitalist struggle instead.

At the party on the rooftop was a man called Philip Habib who was a member of the American Embassy staff in Saigon. He later became a "Special Advisor" to a couple of American presidents and I remember many years later seeing his name in relation to his involvement in some negotiations between North and South Yemen. I hope his judgement there was better than in Vietnam. However, on this evening, he was espousing the American view of the war – how well it was all going, how soon it would all be over etc., and I think, under the influence of a few good strong gin and tonics, I must have tired of his good news story. I told him I didn't believe the war was winnable and I remember him saying something like, "You're quite wrong, we have the minds and the hearts of the people, so we can't lose". And that seemed to be the official line – to gain the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people was the key and its implementation was paramount. I'd have liked to remind him of those words in 1975 as the frantic exodus by helicopter from the roof of the American Embassy in Saigon came to its conclusion. I don't remember seeing all that much love lost between the Vietnamese and the Americans – I think the Vietnamese probably resented their affluence and the fact that they seemed to have taken over the place so completely. They probably saw them as replacements for the despised French colonial masters of an earlier era. Also, I have a suspicion that Vietnamese males would have felt like New Zealand males did in the Second World War when American GIs arrived in New Zealand and captured the hearts of countless New Zealand women.

This leads me to say that without a doubt Vietnamese women were very attractive indeed. Their national dress – the ao dai was graceful and flattering and consisted of two parts – either white or black satin trousers which reached the sole of the foot and over these they wore a form-fitting bodice with long tight sleeves and, traditionally, a mandarin collar. Madame Ngu, the sister in law of an earlier President had modified the neckline to a boat shaped cooler version of the original and even after she was gone the fashion stayed on. The lower part of the dress consisted of two long panels, slit to the waist on both sides and the whole overdress was generally made up of bright coloured light-weight fabric or, for special occasions, brocade might be used. The overall effect was of a graceful, but somewhat impractical costume for everyday wear. It always amazed me that women managed the dress so beautifully and were able to ride bicycles and motor cycles without ending up in a tangled heap of fabric and wheels on the road.

At the end of August and at the beginning of September 1966, I was lucky enough to make two trips outside Saigon – one to the hill station of Dalat and the other to Qui Nhon, the base for our Surgical Team in Binh Dinh province. A friend from Bangkok days, Marie Millar, who was now in Saigon as the British Ambassador's secretary, managed to get us seats on a US military flight to Dalat – supposedly for official purposes. I never did find out what the official purposes were. However, it was a wonderful opportunity to see another part of Vietnam. Dalat is in the Central Highlands and at almost 5,000 ft above sea level was, as you might imagine wonderfully cool. There were many large and beautiful French-styled villas, flowers bloomed in profusion, feathery pine trees were everywhere, fresh fruit and vegetables tumbled out of stalls in the market and we bought large quantities of carrots, leeks, avocados, chokos etc. Much of the produce available in Saigon was flown in from Dalat at enormous cost. I bought a massive bunch of roses there for 200 piastres - a single flower in Saigon would have cost 50 piastres.

Marie and I stayed in an enormous old hotel with long dark corridors, massive rooms equipped with mosquito nets and antiquated plumbing, and magic, we actually had to have blankets on the beds. All this at half the cost of a hotel in Saigon and with twice the charm. The hotel overlooked the not very large, but very pretty man-made lake which had been created by the French. Row boats were available and there was a restaurant beside it to relax with a cup of coffee and a wonderful pastry. The streets were almost devoid of cars and Americans and we walked and browsed in the blessed cool and peace of the place. We were amused at the women in Dalat – dressed in their beautiful floating ao dais, but with heavy buttoned up sweaters worn over them.

We were only able to stay from mid-day on Friday to 10.00 am on Saturday, but it was a wonderful break with no planes screaming overhead or mortars bumping in the night.

Merv needed to go to Qui Nhon on official business with the Surgical Team – stretching it a little bit, I went along as his assistant. We travelled on an Air America DC3 and the journey was long and tiring. The plane had no proper seats – just benches round the sides and the luggage, supplies etc were strapped in place down the centre of the aircraft. There were no back rests and the skinniest of rubber cushions to sit on. In all the journey took six hours – no wonder it was popularly known as the “milk-run”. We landed first at Ban Me Thuot, then at Pleiku in the Central Highlands and the home of the Montagnards or Hill People of Vietnam who seem to hold an endless fascination for outsiders. Their origins are obscure but they may have links to Indonesians, Australian Aborigines, Melanesians and other Pacific Island races. They are quite different from ethnic Vietnamese – in appearance, in cultural background and language. The next stop was Danang on the north east coast, where American forces made a major amphibious landing at the beginning of the real troop buildup in Vietnam in 1965, and finally back down the coast to Qui Nhon. It was a round about journey, and unfortunately we travelled on the day the plane took the long way round – on other days it went in reverse and on a direct route to Qui Nhon. The landings in the Central Highlands were horrendous. Because the airfields were small and surrounded by jungle which might have harboured anything or anyone, the descent had to be made at a very steep angle, similarly the take-off was short and fast and steep. It wasn't an experience I would like to repeat. The larger airfields in the lower areas, were less of a security risk, but sitting on the ground waiting to take off in the sweltering heat was no joke and it wasn't unusual to wait in a queue for half an hour or more.

Of course the telegram we had sent about three days before to say when we would be arriving was never delivered. We had never really expected it would be, but it was worth a try. So we hitched a ride to the doctors' house in a passing military vehicle. Qui Nhon was a hot, dusty crowded town with pot holed streets and loud music issuing forth from the numerous bars and massage parlours. A real wild west atmosphere. A saving grace was that it was close to the sea and we actually managed to swim whilst we were there. The safest place was at the leper colony right on the sea front. The surgical team had formed a good relationship with the people working at the colony so we were able to go through their hospital grounds to the beach without any difficulty. The dazzling white sands, the heat, waving palms, rolling surf and azure blue sea beyond made it an idyllic scene and it was hard to believe that just a few miles away a vicious war was in progress.

The doctors' house was a very large villa (Capitol House) and the Vietnamese had constructed a block of six prefabricated rooms at the rear of the property to provide extra housing for the team. All around and very close were squatters' houses constructed out of anything they could lay their hands on – tea chest, flattened beer cans, shipping containers, anything that would contribute to a wall or roof. Almost all of these dwellings had TV sets and a large number of them were tapping into the electricity supply to Capitol House. A “brown out” situation generally applied there. The nurses were dispersed in houses around the town – two or three sharing a house.

Late on the evening of our arrival, we went with Dr Doug Short, Medical Superintendent of Tauranga Hospital, and the leader of the team, to the hospital. He was off duty, but wanted to check on some patients who had had surgery earlier in the day. The NZ surgical team didn't manage the hospital, they were there to assist the Vietnamese only and had no real say in how the place was run. But they did become adept at planting ideas which would ultimately be taken up by the hospital authorities, and they were always there to offer advice or make recommendations when needed.

The hospital was like no one in New Zealand could ever imagine. The beds often accommodated two patients – topping and tailing – the sheets, if you could call them that, were greyish canvas or they could be whatever the relatives cared to provide. In the children's ward mothers, sisters, etc were asleep on the floor between the beds and nearly everyone had at least two relatives to stay with them, feed them, fan them and

generally look after their needs. Their needs of course involved provision of food and this meant that relatives brought in small cooking stoves and set them up on the verandahs outside. The smell of whatever they used to fuel the stoves and of food wafted in through the doors and windows along with smoke and dust and humidity and noise and it was awful. There was a constant stream of humanity teeming through the wards, including salesmen hawking bananas, rice, noodles, cigarettes etc. It seemed to me to be total chaos, but the doctors and nurses went about their tasks with remarkable calm and somehow the job got done.

The injuries of many were fearsome and upset me terribly. Napalm burns made an indescribable mess of a person. One eighteen year old had had her leg amputated below the knee, several of her toes on the remaining foot were burned off and her arm was raw from top to bottom with burns. Her face was twisted to one side and terribly burnt and it was a miracle that she was alive at all. I wondered if she would thank anyone in later years for keeping her alive. The lashings of mercurochrome in which patients were doused didn't help at all. This form of treatment for burns went out of fashion in NZ years ago but it seemed that it was all they had available there.

I was in awe of the calm acceptance by the Vietnamese people of the most frightful wounds and damage to their loved ones and the care with which they treated them. There seemed to be an enormous strength of will that I feel sure I would never have attained in similar circumstances.

When we reached the emergency ward – actually that's a misnomer, it was nothing more than a corridor designated as an emergency area - we found, laid out on the floor on canvas stretchers, end to end or wherever space permitted, large numbers of people who needed medical attention. It seemed that somewhere up country that morning there had been a battle and this was the result. We picked our way through the crowd, for most of the patients had relatives along with them, and Dr Short did a quick survey to try and set some order of priority for treatment. He noticed a girl who looked to be about 13 or 14, in need of urgent attention. It transpired that at around 8.00 am that morning she had been shot in the side and her spleen was now protruding through the wound. The Vietnamese doctor on duty was overwhelmed with other patients so Dr Short offered to operate and asked if we'd like to watch. I'll never forget that child. She was totally drained of colour. By this time it was 10.00 pm – 14 hours after she had been wounded and yet she was able to lie there, quite conscious and calm and murmur in Vietnamese that she was in much pain. Dr Short said that he felt sure that a European child would never have survived the ordeal for this long and would almost certainly have died.

I'd never seen an operation before and suppose I'm never likely to see another- well not like that one at least. The conditions were primitive to say the least. The room wasn't much more than a box and above the window was an empty gap where an air conditioner should have been. Even at 10.00 pm we were streaming with perspiration. There were no nurses available and I found myself assisting in the operation – not in the surgical procedure, but by holding a broken light above the operating table and pointing it in the right direction. Then the plastic tubes inserted into the incision to remove blood etc clotted and the suction ceased. So the anaesthetist, Dr Al Grant, also from Tauranga Hospital, went to find new tubes and I was left to pump the anaesthetic machine to maintain the child's breathing. One hand, holding up a light, the other trying to keep the pump going at a regular rate was not my idea of a good way to spend a Saturday evening. However, after the spleen had been removed and a check done to ensure that no shrapnel remained, the wound was closed and the child taken to a recovery bed. It was a pretty unconventional procedure, but it saved a life. When we visited the hospital the next morning the patient, having had about 4 pints of blood pumped into her, looked fine. She was actually sitting up in bed and had regained the colour she had not had when we previously saw her. I'd never really wanted to be a theatre nurse and this experience reinforced my thoughts on nursing as a career. Merv had opted out at an early stage – he's not good with blood and gore!

Another operation which had gone on in the adjoining theatre on the previous night, and which I had looked in on briefly, didn't have such a happy ending. At one stage the patient's heart had stopped and I saw the

surgeon administering CPR - heart massage. It looked like a terribly brutal procedure, but it did succeed in restarting her heart. However, an examination on the Sunday morning indicated that she may have suffered brain damage because of the length of time her heart had stopped. I hoped the outcome was not as suspected but we never did find out.

The hospital admitted anyone, including Viet Cong soldiers, and there were several manacled to their beds, and no doubt very pleased to be there. The surgical team often wondered if their willingness to treat these men without prejudice contributed in any way to their security. They never knew for certain but thought it might be a possibility.

I didn't know how the team, coped with the filth and disorder, and the fact that even the most basic rules of hygiene were non-existent here. We were shown one ward, which had only been open for about 4 weeks, and already gave the appearance of having been there for years without being cleaned. In addition, we knew that the NZ Government had paid for a block of toilets to be erected in the hospital grounds for relatives and visitors to use. Now we discovered that inside a week these were blocked up and unusable. It was hard to understand how this could happen because the Vietnamese, personally, were extremely clean and their clothes were generally washed and ironed to perfection.

We returned to Saigon, somewhat shell-shocked, but with a great admiration for the job being done by the members of the team and a better understanding of what they were up against.

Soon after our visit, Dr Short contacted the Embassy to see if we could arrange with the Americans for a fridge to replace one stolen from Capitol House. Losing a fridge was bad, but what was even worse was losing the contents. Their precious supply of New Zealand walked away as well.

In mid-September elections were held and for the weeks leading up to these, there was a certain amount of tension abroad. We were advised not to go roaming around the city – as if we would from choice! One good part about it was that the Americans were placed under curfew from 2.00 pm in the afternoon till 6.00 am the next day and so the city was very quiet indeed for a week or two. We took advantage of this to dine out often and it was nice to go into a restaurant and not be overwhelmed by noisy GIs.

Around about this time, Merv and I, who had been thrown together in the most unusual circumstances, had decided that we might have a future together. As I said later to friends we either had to hate the sight of each other or do the other thing – no half measures! Merv was due to return to New Zealand at the end of November and this, of course, posed a difficulty. I'd really only just arrived and I was loathe to leave again before I'd given the place a fair shot. We told the Charge d'Affaires what we were thinking and he suggested that he recommend to Wellington that Merv continue in Saigon and transfer into the Department – if the Army and the Department agreed. It seemed logical. We needed more staff, Merv had already been there for more than a year and had a very good knowledge of how things worked in Saigon, and he and Arthur had a good working relationship. Around about this time, Major-General McKinnon, the Chief of the Defence Staff, came to Saigon and over lunch at the Residence, the idea was put to him. He said he'd be happy to approve Merv's release from the NZ Army if approval was gained from External Affairs to the transfer. We decided to wait for the imminent visit of the dreaded inspection team and see what their reaction was. Arthur was taking a short break in Wellington after the team's visit and he planned to discuss the proposal whilst there. We had vague ideas of perhaps emigrating to Canada if the plan came to nought or even to Southern Rhodesia where Merv's younger brother was in the police force. This didn't particularly appeal to me – I had visions of being murdered in my bed – the situation in Kenya was pretty well documented and I had a suspicion there might be a repeat in other parts of Africa in the not too distant future.

In early October I wrote home to my parents apologising for not having written for weeks. I know my silence must have worried them, but we had been frantically busy with various visitors, a group of observers

for the elections, the inspection team from Wellington and the normal work of the Embassy. Thankfully, by this time our numbers had swelled by one. John Clarke, who had been Second Secretary in Bangkok, transferred to Saigon and his arrival was more than welcome

I'd also had the unexpected trauma of a few days in the Grall Hospital in Saigon. I'd tried to ignore some twingy pains but after a few days couldn't ignore them any longer. The thought of appendicitis crossed my mind. One evening when Merv had come home with me for dinner, I realised I needed medical help. I couldn't drive the car by this time and Merv couldn't drive. So he walked back to the Embassy – I had no telephone at home – and commandeered John who had been able to bring his Volkswagen (thank heaven for Volkswagens) into the country via the Bristol and the two then accompanied me to the hospital. Well, of course, the hospital was a French-run one and no-one spoke English. My French was practically non-existent. I was popped into an examination room and stripped almost totally bare and Merv was called in to explain my symptoms. They took my temperature in a most unexpected place and if I hadn't been feeling so awful I'd probably have died of embarrassment. But that wasn't the end of it. John and Merv had left a note at the Embassy to tell Arthur, who was out at a dinner party, where we were and so the next thing I knew was that John came bursting into the room saying "Arthur's here" and in walked Arthur! He did a double take and reversed rapidly out of the room. But he was immediately called back in as his French was impeccable and the doctors thought he might be useful given that Merv's French wasn't great. So at one stage, I had all the male staff of the Embassy hovering anxiously around me and any dignity I might have had was completely lost. The doctors decided I'd better stay, but then discovered they had no bed. One of the nurses from the Qui Nhon surgical team was actually staying over with me that night so I didn't feel quite so badly about going home, but then they discovered a bed in the maternity ward and quickly made arrangements for me to go there. So we all piled into an ambulance to be taken a couple of hundred yards and I was duly admitted with my male entourage in tow. Once again I was stripped and laid out for inspection, this time by a group of French medical students. And then I was given a bag of ice to put on my stomach and pumped full of what I think was penicillin. Merv was back first thing in the morning with masses of cleaning materials to clean the bathroom which adjoined my room – it needed it. No one realised at the time, that one is expected to have one's servant provide food and as a result the diet I was given consisted of congealed spaghetti, lumpy mashed potato, a slice of ham and three canned apricot halves for practically every meal. Absolutely awful. X-rays and blood tests proceeded over the next couple of days and the pain, thankfully, subsided. After another day, when things had calmed down and the doctors still hadn't come up with any real results, I discharged myself. Perhaps the gall bladder I had removed a few years later was the culprit.

I was sorry to have missed Trinh and Bruce Middleton's wedding whilst I was incarcerated.

Merv and I had made plans quite a while previously to go to Bangkok for what would have been Labour weekend in New Zealand. To get out of Saigon on civil aircraft it was necessary to book weeks in advance. Then we learned that the Inspection Team was due to arrive on the day we expected to travel back from Bangkok. We went ahead with our plans anyway – the opportunity to get out of Vietnam was too good to let go.

I looked at Bangkok with new eyes. I'd found it a frustrating place and hadn't been too sorry to leave after two years there. Now, by comparison with Saigon, it looked like paradise. It seemed so clean and was so much more sophisticated with its elegant hotels and restaurants and wonderful shops. A visit to my hairdresser/manicurist/pedicurist was a joy and my dressmaker greeted me with open arms. I'd not even tried to look for a dressmaker in Saigon, and the hairdresser I'd been to didn't begin to measure up to my wonderful girl in Bangkok.

Merv and I decided we'd be really optimistic and persuaded ourselves that he would be transferring to the Embassy staff officially. We had decided that it might be nice to spend a honeymoon in Hong Kong at Christmas, so I asked my dressmaker to make for me a pale almond green Thai silk dress with matching

coat. Even if the wedding didn't eventuate at that time, it would be nice to have in my wardrobe. And after browsing in my favourite jewellers we came away with a nine stone band of diamonds which, although not a conventional engagement ring, I thought was perfect. We didn't know at that stage that the Vietnamese Prime Minister, Nguyen Cao Ky, and his wife, would visit New Zealand in February and that we would end up frantically busy – so busy in fact, that our weddings – two of them – and I'll explain that later, were incidentals in a very busy lead up to that visit.

A journey to Pattaya at the weekend with a group of friends from the Embassy was a delight. Pattaya was about a two hour drive from Bangkok and was still quite undeveloped. American troops were beginning to go there on R & R from Vietnam, but at that stage weren't too obtrusive. There was still only one hotel at Pattaya, the Nipa Lodge, and holiday accommodation was mostly in bungalows owned by companies or leased by embassies with the occasional beach complex run by enterprising Thais where you could rent a small cabin. The New Zealand Embassy bungalow was away from the main beach but was a wonderful place to get away from it all and relax. It was a simple bungalow on stilts with three bedrooms on the top floor, the living area was the verandah right across the front and the dining area was the open space beneath. But it was all we ever wanted at such a heavenly beach. It was only 50 metres or so from the seashore where, of course, we spent almost every waking hour. You could hire boats for water skiing at something like \$5.00 an hour or a fishing ketch to go out to the offshore islands for about \$10.00 for the whole day. The only place to eat out was a small restaurant called the Nipa Hut which served Mexican food and wonderful Mai Tai's in hollowed out pineapple shells. After dinner we'd adjourn to Babbo's – a nightclub with a thatched roof built on stilts out over the sea at the far end of Pattaya beach where they had a succession of the most wonderful Filipino dance bands. At that time, it was the **only** place to be seen and we'd stay there for hours sipping G & Ts, listening to the music and dancing in the candlelight.

After my stint in hospital and our wonderful few days in Bangkok we were up and running again by the time the inspection team, Malcolm Templeton from the Department of External Affairs and John Robertson from the Public Service Commission, arrived. They went over us and the office with a fine tooth comb but we felt confident that the resulting report would mean the end to our rather inadequate set up. Nobody in Wellington seemed to have any idea what a lousy place Saigon was to live in, nor did they seem to understand just how busy the office was and how difficult it was to keep our heads above water. Fortunately, none of us were panic artists or liable to hysteria and we got by, but it was great to have a couple of experts actually come to have a look at the place and our working and living conditions and for us to sit down and talk with them and explain how things were. We hoped they'd make recommendations to Wellington about the shortcomings of the office, its equipment and furnishings, its security needs, the lack of sufficient transport, and the need for some appropriate leave provisions to be made for us in line with those made by other Embassies in Saigon, and most important of all, to recommend more staff.

The Inspection Team was very sympathetic to our problems. When they were able to talk to people locally about the accommodation situation in Saigon, they were happy to recommend that I keep my little house. Praise be! They were also sympathetic to the idea of Merv transferring into the Department. Their recommendation was that the office be officially set up with its own budget, that it be equipped and staffed properly, and that provision for regular breaks away from Saigon be made for us. Fortuitously, the office car was being used elsewhere on one of the days the Inspection Team visited and I had to take them in Frank's little Volkswagen, back to the Caravelle Hotel. I think this gave them sufficient experience of Saigon traffic and the horrors of driving in it to recommend that we have a second vehicle, a station wagon, and a driver for it. The journey took place in the early evening rush hour and we were hemmed in on all sides by towering military vehicles belching diesel fumes which enveloped us in a choking haze, motor cyclists were diving dangerously in and out of the traffic and it was clear to them, what we had always known - traffic rules didn't exist or if they did they certainly weren't being observed. It was total chaos.

At the end of October the chaos became even worse. Suddenly preparations for National Day got under way. Streets all over the city were blocked off. They held rehearsals for the parade at night, and on the

night of the first rehearsal, never having experienced this before, Merv, John and I decided to eat out down town. Well after fuming through dense traffic and being unable to even get within a mile of town, we finally ended up at the favourite place at the bottom of the street – again! I couldn't reconcile all this fuss with a country at war – the pomp and pageantry was, I thought, totally misplaced. If you can imagine shutting off the Quays and the Ngauranga Gorge in Wellington that would possibly equate.

Whether it was to coincide with National Day or not we don't know but, one evening, we were sitting enjoying the cool after dinner, when there was the most horrendous explosion followed by a shock wave which sent the curtains billowing inwards and made the windows rattle and creak. We heard the next day that one of the largest ammunition dumps in Vietnam – about 13 miles from Saigon - had been blown up. It was quite unnerving because you had no way of telling what might follow. There seemed to be quite a bit of Viet Cong activity in various parts of the city around this time but fortunately where I lived and where the Embassy was situated meant we were away from the most likely targets. Sir Stephen and Lady Weir came from Bangkok for the National Day celebrations and were quite unaware when they arrived to take up their positions to watch the parade, that just prior to their arrival only a few hundred metres away, shells had landed. Half an hour later the same area was shelled and once again they were not aware of what had happened.

But life still went on and I mentioned to my parents that we had been to a ball given by the Canadian Delegation to the ICC. They were a very social bunch and had lots of parties, but this was particularly nice because it was an opportunity to be quite formal with the men in dinner jackets and the women in long dresses etc. Fortunately, the evenings could be pleasantly cool and it wasn't too much of a hardship to go the full mile and put on stockings.

I wrote home in November to thank my mother for sending me some New Zealand honey – a package of small gift jars, which I never expected to receive. She sent it surface mail. Even if it made it to Saigon it was almost certain that it would be pilfered. Pilfering was a real problem, so much so that the Prime Minister himself had announced that he was going to put a stop to it and ordered that an execution place be prepared so that offenders could be shot. I don't remember, however, hearing that any one was executed. The Prime Minister also announced that he was going to shut down the black market! That never happened either. All over the city you would find items stamped with the clasped hands over a US flag and a slogan which indicated that this was "A gift of the American People to the People of Vietnam". But you'd pay a high price for it. Our servant, who did nearly all of our shopping in the market, would come home with a tin of cooking oil, for instance, with this stamp and slogan on it, we actually bought paper back books with the same stamp and there were many more items similarly gifted but which found their way to the black market. Black market or not, Ah Fong kept a record of every piastre she spent. She couldn't write in English, probably couldn't write at all if the truth were known, but she paid someone in the market to write up a small account book. We would find absolutely everything she had bought listed including "rice for you", "rice for cat", "fish for you", "fish for cat", which amused us no end. We heard many stories about untrustworthy servants, but we trusted her implicitly and never had reason not to.

Arthur came back to Saigon with the good news that Merv could transfer to the Embassy staff. With the news of our impending marriage it was agreed that he extend his time for a further year and that I continue my posting until the end of 1967. I had, however, to accept that I would be detached from the seconded staff and employed as "local staff" which of course meant a quite considerable reduction in my salary. No such thing then as equal opportunity. My house would become Merv's house and when I think of the conditions of service now for married couples I realise that the Department got a pretty good deal out of that arrangement.

With this news we decided definitely to be married at Christmas. Merv was still in the military billet in the heart of Saigon and I really wanted him out of there. Prior to my arrival, a NZ army colleague, Dick Grigg, who lived in the same billet, had been killed when the Viet Cong drove a truck of explosives right up to

building and it blew up creating a huge mess and demolishing the front. Dick had heard the commotion and the shouting of the military guards on duty at the time and had gone to the window to see what was happening. The air conditioner, which was installed in the wall beneath the windows, was blown inwards by the blast and he was killed. Fortunately, Merv's room was at the rear of the building, but one lived with the possibility of a repeat performance by the Viet Cong every day and I wanted some peace of mind.

So we began to plan for a wedding just prior to Christmas and a trip to Hong Kong for a week's honeymoon. We wondered if, by being married at the Embassy by the New Zealand Army Padre who was stationed at Nui Dat with the NZ contingent, we might be able to avoid a Vietnamese civil ceremony. But I remembered a situation in Bangkok where a church wedding had been found, eighteen months later, not to have been sufficient and the couple involved had to then go through a very belated Thai civil wedding ceremony to make their union legal. I wrote to the head of the Consular Division in Wellington to check on the legality of an Embassy wedding.

In the meantime, Derek Cameron, the Padre had readily agreed to perform our marriage service, Arthur had agreed to be best man and to host the reception after the wedding as his gift to us, my friends in Bangkok, Jean Cameron and Toni Chapman, made plans to come to Saigon for the occasion, and Colonel Smith, the Commander of the Army force in Saigon agreed to give me away. The wedding dress and accessories were ready, the guest list drawn up, and the date and time set for 6.00 pm on 22 December. We made bookings with Air France to fly out to Hong Kong on 23 December and bookings at the Ambassador Hotel in Kowloon. I just knew that it was all too good to be true. And about a week before the wedding date I was proven to be right for we discovered that we had to go through with the Vietnamese civil ceremony after all. The diplomatic bag with an answer to my query about the legality of our marriage had been held up somewhere. The advice we received was that the marriage, as we planned it, would be legal within the British Commonwealth, illegal elsewhere. So we had no option but to try and arrange a civil ceremony as quickly as possible. In Vietnam it was obligatory to have medical examinations, give ten days notice of intention to marry, produce birth certificates no more than three months old, and fill out innumerable forms. Fortunately, my brief stay in the Grall Hospital in September had provided me with x-rays and blood tests, but Merv had none of these available. He rushed off on the Saturday morning to a US military hospital and after they had taken goodness knows how much blood from him they informed him the results wouldn't be through for ten days. That, of course, was just too late. So we organised an appointment with a local Vietnamese doctor who completed the X-ray and blood tests in no time at all. Then came to job of persuading the Vietnamese authorities that we needed approval for a very fast wedding. Merv spent hours getting the details organised. They complained that my birth certificate – being eight years old – was unacceptable so I had to sit down and write a letter saying how sorry I was that I didn't have a newer one, but being unaware of Vietnamese custom, etc, etc.... And finally, much to our surprise, and after Merv had actually seen someone he thought was the Mayor of Saigon or if not him, someone of equal stature – he was never quite certain - we got approval for a civil ceremony on Tuesday 20 December at 9.30 am – no other time was available.

But by this time, we were up to our eyes in telegrams and the work involved with the forthcoming visit of Prime Minister Ky to New Zealand. I don't know how many times his programme was transmitted and changed and retransmitted and as all the telegraphic exchanges were in code it was a real pain. The coding system we used (One Time Pad) meant that every word in the message had to be looked up in a book and translated into the corresponding four figure number, then transferred onto a pad containing already printed groups of five figure numbers. Once all the figures were in place, you subtracted the bottom line from the top line, and ended up with lines of new five figure groups. These were then typed in lines of ten groups and with five rows to a block and then, finally, it had to be delivered to the telegraph office for transmission to Wellington. Their inward messages were uncoded by reversing the whole procedure. It was a frustrating and laborious job. I felt that much of the content didn't need to be in code, but didn't have any control over that so had to just get on with the job. Fortunately everyone pitched in and we managed to keep on top of it – just.

On the morning of the 'first' wedding, we went to work as usual at 8.00 am. Merv had in the previous week asked an American running a security company in Saigon, to come in and have a look at the Embassy and make some recommendations about upgrading its level of security. So the consultant duly arrived and Merv began to show him around. But it all took a bit longer than expected and finally it was clear we would have to leave for the wedding. The visitor did a bit of a double take when Merv said "Look, would you excuse me, I've got an appointment to get married at 9.30 am".

So Arthur, Toni Chapman (who had arrived from Bangkok over the weekend), Janine our Vietnamese receptionist who acted as our translator, and Merv and myself set off for this very drab, bare little office down by the river with the noise of traffic and the smell of diesel pouring through the open shutters. Fortunately the Vietnamese gentleman who conducted the service was a pleasant friendly man, very interested in New Zealand and in us – a little surprised that we didn't have brown faces and very interested to hear about Arthur's French grandmother who had eaten rats to stay alive in the siege of Paris. She had been responsible for Arthur's bi-linguism. Our celebrant had, for the occasion, draped a wide royal blue sash over his shoulder and he questioned us about why it was necessary for us to have a Vietnamese civil ceremony at all and there was surprise that we hadn't drawn up a marriage contract which was usual when Vietnamese married. He didn't speak a word of English, and we didn't understand a word he said apart from our names, but with Janine translating the Vietnamese and Arthur the French it went off relatively easily. Every time Merv's and my names were mentioned the surnames came out first followed by our Christian names and it was hard to keep a straight face. We didn't know quite when Merv was supposed to place the ring on my finger either, but somehow it all ended up as it should have. At one stage Janine translated a statement that we had applied for and been granted permission to be married "in a short time". This really broke us up – the critical question for every prostitute in Vietnam was "You want short time or?". Before we left we were presented with a "Family Book", all in Vietnamese, and it was pointed out that there were spaces to enter the names of twelve offspring. We were also told that we might return for another book should we need more space!

I had put a bottle of champagne in my fridge and tried to explain to Ah Fong that we'd be back for it around 10.00 am, but I guess she must have decided I'd made a mistake – drinking champagne in the morning, what next - for when we went to my house after the ceremony we found everything locked up. Ah Fong had gone to the market and I didn't have keys. I always expected she'd be there to let me in, so why have keys? Not to be defeated we went back to the Embassy and had a glass of warm sherry instead. Then we went back to work and continued flat out for the rest of the day – apart from when Toni and I went out to a luncheon being given for me by secretaries from the other embassies. It was a real show stopper to walk into that luncheon and announce that I'd been married that morning, that I was hard at work and that there would still be another ceremony – the planned one, on Thursday.

On Wednesday we went to work as usual. Jean arrived from Bangkok and so she and Toni joined our staff temporarily and their assistance was more than welcome because by this time, John who had not taken leave before he came to Saigon, had returned to New Zealand for a few weeks.

On Wednesday evening we had a small pre-wedding dinner party. My house was a bit chaotic so it was held on the patio at the Embassy. Padre Cameron, Bob and Nell Smith, Arthur, Jean, Toni, Merv and myself made up the guest list and it was a pleasant relaxed evening. It was also a good opportunity for me to talk with the Padre who I hadn't met before, although Merv had known him briefly in New Zealand.

If I'd ever had thoughts about waking up on my wedding morning, having a leisurely breakfast, taking my time about getting ready etc, forget it, it was back to the office as usual. Merv had moved from the billet into the Embassy a few days before and he continued working right up until about 5.30 pm when he called it a day and went upstairs to prepare for the wedding at 6.00 pm. Jean, Toni and I worked till around 1.00 pm then went home to my place for a quick lunch before heading down town to the hairdresser for the full

treatment – manicure, pedicure and hairdo. It all took an inordinate amount of time and I still had to collect a petticoat I had had made to wear under my wedding dress. The Vietnamese did some very lovely hand embroidered underwear and I'd ordered one or two things. My going away dress was a disaster – the dressmaker didn't seem to know much about his subject, and he apologised that he hadn't been able to find a zipper to match the material – a turquoise linen – so had put in a white one. It was ghastly, but I wore it anyway – once only. Thank heaven I'd had my wedding outfit made in Bangkok. Merv had had more luck with his new suit, it was just fine.

I finally made it back to my house around 5.15 pm and very hurriedly showered and dressed and just made it to the Embassy by 6.00 pm. Nell Smith and Jean had been down to the flower market early in the morning and the downstairs reception area was filled with flowers, yellow gladioli, orange bird of paradise, white gladioli, white roses and yellow mimosa and it looked very festive indeed. When I arrived, Arthur dashed upstairs to put on the Mozart wedding march because he didn't want anyone else to operate his music system, but as he was also the bestman, it didn't quite tie together. So by the time he had dashed back down the stairs we were well into the piece before Colonel Smith and I could make our way to where Merv and the Padre waited. Our arrival almost coincided with Arthur's! I doubt whether anybody noticed the timing.

We had asked only close friends and the servants to the ceremony. All the servants wore their Sunday best – Ah Fong in black pants and a special occasion top of dark blue, the head servant of the Embassy in a dark grey suit, his wife in a Vietnamese ao dai of gold silk over black pants and all the other servants in immaculate white shirts and with black bow ties. They seemed to be enjoying the proceedings enormously. I guess it was all a bit unusual. The remaining guests – about 40 in all – arrived shortly afterwards and food and champagne flowed. Our wedding cake was a sponge cake iced with butter icing – no fruit cakes or the ingredients to make one in Vietnam. A small Vietnamese dance band contributed their bit and we had a very enjoyable evening – cut short of course by the curfew. Arthur was as always a wonderful host and we were very grateful indeed for his generosity. His support had, in fact, secured our future.

Jean and Toni switched accommodation with Merv on our wedding night and the servants who weren't quite sure just what was going on and who was going to sleep where, thought this was a very strange way to conduct a marriage. On Friday morning we left for Hong Kong and not even the thought of the work load which would be waiting when we returned overcame our pleasure at actually getting out of Saigon and for Christmas and New Year at that! We very nearly missed the plane – we were waiting for the boarding call which never came, the public address system had broken down – again! Fortunately Merv went to check when the flight expected to leave only to be told that they were waiting just for us – where on earth had we been? We were the last to board and I'm not quite sure how it came about but we ended up in first class seats. We suspect Rachel Thuy, a very pleasant Polish woman who worked in the Air France office, who had done our bookings and come to our wedding had worked the miracle for us. It was a wonderful start to a wonderful week. Even having to go the long way round, with a stop off in Phnom Penh, didn't detract from our pleasure in getting out of Saigon.

Our hotel seemed like heaven with TV, a telephone in the bathroom – surely the height of luxury – excellent room service, a marvellous restaurant on the 18th floor overlooking Hong Kong Island and the harbour and, best of all, water that gushed from the taps. In Saigon it merely trickled. I don't think we'd realised how stressed we were – to be in a place without the tensions that existed in Vietnam was the most wonderful feeling and we walked and walked and as had happened to me before in Hong Kong, my feet killed me. I was always certain when we set out that I had comfortable shoes on, but somehow they turned out to be the worst possible shoes to wear for long walks. But I didn't care one little bit because it was cool and we actually needed warm clothing. A adored Hong Kong – this was my fourth visit. Merv had never been there before and was enthralled. I had great difficulty moving him out of the book shops and of all things, the toy shops with all those wonderful mechanical things. We spent hours in Lane Crawford's Department store, just browsing and we spent some money which we'd received as wedding gifts on some silverware for our table. We thought we'd do something quite unusual – go to a movie! We noticed that a Helen McInnes murder

mystery was showing at a cinema not far from our hotel and we set out for a late morning session. There seemed to be quite a few amahs and children in the theatre but we didn't give it much thought. The movie turned out to be "Little Women" with Elizabeth Taylor, June Allyson, Margaret O'Brien, Peter Lawford, etc. Merv very gallantly sat through it for my sake – some time later in Singapore, I had to sit through an evening of wrestling to compensate! I rather wished I'd walked out on "Little Women".

It was marvellous to be in a civilized city – the streets were clean, traffic moved in an orderly fashion and there were no bicycles. It was wonderful to climb into a taxi that had a warrant of fitness and a driver who was a professional taxi driver and who spoke English. A dramatic contrast to Saigon where almost anything on four wheels and in any condition passed as a taxi. The drivers were cowboys whose only interest was getting you to your destination as fast as possible, – if the destination could be found that is – charge as much as possible, extract as large a tip as possible and then pile in another passenger. Hong Kong was decorated for Christmas – huge lighted Christmas trees lit up several buildings and the Hilton Hotel had a whole string of brightly lit trees wrapped around the front of the building and a huge tree standing beside it. Just before sunset one evening we went to one of the cocktail bars in the Hilton, the Crows Nest. It was magical sitting high up there in the gathering dusk, sipping brandy alexanders and watching the lights come on all over the city below us. The Star Ferry service, between Hong Kong Island and Kowloon was efficient and frequent so we never had to wait for more than two or three minutes. We went across to Victoria Island one evening around 10.30 pm and climbed aboard the tram to take a look at the night view from the Peak, the highest one could get in the city. Hong Kong's neon lights don't blink and the result is a beautiful colourful tranquil scene, much of it reflected in the harbour and too breathtaking to describe.

We were lucky to know a New Zealand couple, Shirley and Noel Challis, who were living in Hong Kong. Their apartment on the hill looking down over the city and harbour was wonderful and I must admit to feeling a bit envious of their lifestyle and their location. We spent New Year's eve with them and then went down into the city to see the New Year in at the British Club. It was fascinating to see the sort of life the expatriate community was living in this far flung outpost of British colonialism. It was plush to say the least!

Whilst we were visiting the Challis', we were served by two black and white amahs which was usual. But these two ladies were quite unusual and had an amazing story to tell. They had worked for Noel and Shirley in Saigon but when they left for Hong Kong, despite a great deal of effort on Noel's part, they were not able to arrange exit visas to enable their servants to accompany them. They told them, however, that if ever they could get to Hong Kong under their own initiative they would be more than happy to employ them again. Some months went by and one evening there was a knock at the door. To the Challis' amazement there were the two amahs. They had somehow gained visas for a short holiday in Hong Kong. When they reached Hong Kong, they discarded their papers and passports of whatever they had with them, and by some means or other crossed the border into China. Once there, by means known only to themselves, they became part of the illegal flow of refugees into Hong Kong and were now on the Challis' doorstep ready to take them up on their offer of employment. Fortunately Noel and Shirley were able to find jobs for the new servants they now had and after a certain amount of negotiation with the Hong Kong authorities, work permits were obtained for the two newcomers. To look at these ladies you would hardly believe they could cross a busy street by themselves, let alone follow the circuitous route they had taken from Saigon to Hong Kong.

Sadly we left Hong Kong on New Year's day and made our way back to Saigon complete with 64 lbs of excess baggage. It cost us a fortune, but we didn't care – we'd had a ball. I have to admit a large proportion of the excess was mine – Merv limited his buying to a few shirts and shoes and ties. But I didn't feel too badly when I thought of the next few months with nothing to buy and nowhere to go.

An enormous pile of telegrams and other work waited for us when we returned to the office. Arthur had valiantly tried to deal with the telegrams, but in the end, in desperation, he had decided to uncode the first

paragraph and the last paragraph of each inward message, in the expectation that any instructions would be most likely to appear there. He'd managed to send out some messages, but there were lots more to go. So once again, nose to the grindstone. I think it took us a month to actually fully decode those telegrams, but there didn't seem to be any dramas and I don't remember being horrified at something we'd missed because of Arthur's ingenious way of dealing with them.

We never meant to have a cat, but when, early in the new year an American friend mentioned that someone had decided not to take the last kitten from a litter her Siamese cat had produced, we succumbed. We duly brought this small cream and brown fur ball home and spent a sleepless night listening to her yowling and crying. We named her Mimi after the leading lady in *La Boheme* – she was a real diva. She settled down fairly quickly but we had great difficulty in persuading her to go beyond her litter box and use the garden for her toilet stops. We even resorted to sitting outside in the evenings and closing the doors into the house so that she couldn't use the litter tray. We knelt down with her and propelled her small paws through the soil to try and give her the message. It all seemed in vain until one night a very excited Ah Fong shouted out "Mimi, cabinet – Mimi, cabinet" – "cabinet" meaning "toilet" and we turned around to actually seeing Mimi doing what was expected of her. And that was the end of the litter tray. She was great company and we enjoyed her enormously – apart from one night when she climbed to the top of a very tall tree we had in our garden and refused to come down. We cajoled and called and tempted her with food but it was no use and after we'd decided to opt out of a cocktail party we were supposed to be going to that evening, Merv finally climbed the tree himself and managed to grab hold of her and bring her down. No such think as a fire service to get cats down out of trees in Saigon!

Then came the time when she needed to be spayed. The Americans had a large veterinary practice not far from Tan Son Nhut airport to take care of the many dogs they used to guard the perimeter fence of the airport. They also attended to any animals brought in by anyone else so we planned to use their services for Mimi. But first we were taking a short break away from Saigon and I remember trying to explain to Ah Fong that she was not to allow Mimi to have any boyfriends while we were away – she was to keep her under surveillance at all times. We arrived back to find a beaming Ah Fong stating quite firmly that Mimi had not had any liaisons, she was quite safe. We dropped Mimi off early one morning at the vet station and were told we'd be able to collect her in the afternoon, but when we returned she was still totally out of it. The Americans were having a barbecue and there was a wonderful smell of hickory smoked steaks, chicken etc wafting right over her and she was totally unaware of any of it. Her stomach, shaved bare, was covered in mercurochrome and we felt like torturers for having subjected her to this. We left her there for another hour or two and when we finally collected her she was a very wobbly scared puss. So once again we opted out of a cocktail party to take care of her. It was like having a baby in the house.

Tet, the Chinese New Year, began on 9 February and there was a blessed three days truce which ended at 7 am on 12 February. By 7.20 am and at regular intervals after there were the most dreadful bumps and bangs ever. I guess the Viet Cong used the time at peace to reorganise themselves and they certainly sounded very close indeed. It was maddening, because although it was obvious bombardments were going on the news service never said anything and we were left in total ignorance. I had the feeling that this was harder on my nerves than it would have been had I known exactly where and what was being bombed.

The Tet holiday was quite an experience. The markets and everything else closed down, and you'd never have believed the filth that accumulated in those few days. It was the practice for people to dump rubbish in piles at designated points in a street from whence it was removed. Over the Tet holiday period the removal, sporadic at any time, ceased altogether. Merv and I went out briefly on the third morning, just to brush away the cobwebs a bit and we were horrified at what we saw. We found it hard to understand that the people seemed to care so little in what conditions they were living and as far as we could make out, did little to help themselves. But I suppose if I'd lived in a country which had been at war for twenty years or so, I'd feel pretty hopeless too, and if the infrastructures for a decent water system, a decent sewage disposal system and proper garbage disposal didn't exist, the average man in the street couldn't do much about that.

Just recently water pipes under a street had collapsed and given the age of the city's water pipes it was probably going to be a regular occurrence as the years went by. The vast influx of extra people into Saigon was stretching everything to breaking point. One evening, Merv and I stood leaning over our gate just enjoying the relative cool of the evening, but we didn't stick around there too long for down the street at one of the garbage collection points, which hadn't been touched for days, we could see rats swarming over the piles of rubbish. On the evening breeze the smell began to penetrate our senses as well. Not a nice place to be.

We decided to hold a small dinner party during Tet. Ah Fong had taken a break so I thought it would be good to do my own cooking for a change. With Merv's help I prepared snacks, lots of stuffed peppers and salads and rice and a dessert and coffee and ended up absolutely exhausted. By the time we had finished the dishes late in the evening we decided that we'd never do that again. Through the whole performance perspiration trickled down our backs, down our legs and down our arms and it was just too much effort in the heat. It made me appreciate how wonderful Ah Fong was. She always looked immaculate, never the dishevelled wreck I turned out to be after an evening's entertaining.

One of the concessions which emerged from the Inspection Team's visit to Saigon was a provision for mid-tour leave. The Department would pay the equivalent of a return air fare to Hong Kong for us and we could take a month's leave. Merv and I decided to use our leave for a trip to Malaysia. Because we'd both been posted there previously it still held a lot of attraction for us and we didn't imagine that it would have changed much from the beautiful orderly place we had known earlier. We were right. But first, we spent a few days in Singapore, then we visited friends in Kuala Lumpur, spent a week at Port Dickson, in a rather strange bungalow called "Halcyon" owned by an even stranger man who had every centrefold from Playboy magazine that had ever been printed stuck up on the walls of his "office", and then to Bangkok for a few days, a visit to Pattaya and finally back to Saigon.

A secretary from Singapore, who had finished her posting there, agreed to come Saigon to relieve in my absence and she duly arrived. She seemed a little distracted and didn't really give the impression of wanting to be there. She hadn't responded all that well to other Embassy secretaries I had invited in for lunch to meet her and I felt a certain amount of apprehension about leaving, but all our plans were made and it was too late to back out. So it wasn't surprising when we got to Kuala Lumpur to find that she had gone to Singapore for Easter, which happened during our leave period, and hadn't returned. It transpired she had been deeply involved with an Indian officer serving with the Singapore navy, but that there had been total opposition from his family to any marriage between them. However, when she went to Singapore, and told him she was pregnant, he threw down the gauntlet to his family and said he was going to marry her regardless. And that was that. Gay Dailey from the Bangkok Embassy went to Saigon to fill in for the remainder of my absence.

On 11 March, Janine, our receptionist, and Brian Goodwin, of the Australian Embassy were married. They had, we understand, only met at our own wedding in December. We are all inclined to distrust brief courtships, but our own continuing marriage and Brian and Janine's, who we met again in 1986 in Paris where Brian was a Counsellor at the Australian Embassy, seem to discount the idea that to marry in haste meant repenting at leisure. Janine's replacement, Chau, was a delightful young Vietnamese woman with a bubbly happy personality who fitted in with us beautifully. She was obviously a good choice for more than the Embassy because later she and John Clarke married.

We still continued, when we could, to lunch at the Cercle Sportif but one of these lunches was to prove a bad mistake. Late in the afternoon, Merv began to feel ill. We hoped that whatever it was would pass, but by 9.30 or so he was in a really bad way – vomiting, sweating and with diarrhoea setting in. It was obvious he needed some medical attention, but the curfew was in effect and we had no telephone or means of getting medical aid. So there was nothing for it, but to climb into the little blue Volkswagen and take off into the town centre where a large American Military Hospital was situated. We tore through the silent streets with

lights blazing and the inside light on so that any military patrol we might encounter could be assured we weren't a bomb laden Viet Cong sabotage unit. I had time to think how marvellous it was driving without the hindrance of other traffic. We arrived at the military hospital and were immediately surrounded by Military Police with guns at the ready. Hastily I jumped out of the car and yelled out that we needed help. Once they recognised Europeans they came to the rescue quickly and Merv was taken straight to an emergency room and seen by a doctor. He was given injections to stop the vomiting and diarrhoea and it was suggested that we wait until there was an improvement before we headed off home again. An hour or two later we did the trip in reverse and without encountering any trouble. But what we chose to eat for lunch at the Cercle Sportif after that was very carefully selected and didn't include seafood!

On one of our visits to Singapore, Merv and I had purchased furniture for the Embassy – rattan chairs, coffee tables, for visitors, desks and office chairs etc and all in all we were gradually becoming more comfortably equipped. We had also acquired a Holden station wagon and a motor scooter for the messenger. A new driver, Hoa, had been engaged for the Holden and with Frank's Volkswagen on loan to us and John Clarke with his own Volkswagen, we were fairly mobile. The vehicles were, of course, bought in on a Bristol from Singapore. The Bristols were the focus of a great deal of attention from American military personnel who had never seen the like before. They had obviously disappeared from the inventory of the US airforce many years before. So it wasn't unusual to see Americans with cameras at the ready as our life line aircraft trundled across the runway to the terminal. The piece de resistance was when the front of the plane opened up and out of it emerged a wide range of furniture, equipment and supplies and the station wagon, the scooter, John Clarke's and later Toni Chapman's cars were driven out.

The arrival of the vehicles prompted us to undertake an exercise which we felt would probably be futile but we wanted to see if we could clear the vehicles through Customs and Foreign Affairs, without paying the usual bribes. The first step was to prepare twenty two copies of an entry document for each vehicle. Why twenty-two copies we didn't know. Then we set out to get signatures and stamps from what turned out to be almost every official in every government office in Saigon. We each took a turn at the daily exercise and our receptionist, Chau, accompanied whoever had the task for that day. Always one was expected to wait – and wait – and wait some more, until the appropriate official was available. Then, finally, the signature and the stamp would be affixed to all twenty-two copies of our forms. We'd smile and say thank you and shake hands and leave. Sometimes, we'd find ourselves back in an office we had already been to for yet another signature. Finally, after about four days, we had all the signatures and the clearance was approved. Not a piastre had changed hands. But if we ever stopped to figure out just how much it had cost in our own time we would not have been amused. We had to accept that bribes were an element of life in Vietnam and when more clearances were required, we quietly, if unhappily, paid up. At the end of the exercise, we were handed back eighteen copies of the form "for your files", said the little man at the last place of call. We cracked open a bottle of champagne to celebrate our accomplishment,

In early July, we had another addition to the staff. Toni Chapman, who had been Administration Assistant in Bangkok, transferred to Saigon. Bangkok turned out to be the stepping stone to Saigon for three of us. It was probably the best thing that could have happened – it opened the way for others to follow and we took the postings from a position of a fair knowledge of what we were letting ourselves in for.

We decided the best thing for Toni would be for her to take over the small house Merv and I were living in and we would search for something else. Easier said than done! After a lot of searching we ended up taking a house in an area where security was a bit dicey. It was "over the bridge" in Truong Minh Giang and in the general direction of the airport. To reach the house, which was set in quite a large pleasant garden behind 8ft high concrete walls and a metal gate of similar height, we had to negotiate a clay alleyway which was dotted with innumerable potholes and which, in the rainy season, became an absolute bog. The house wasn't large, but it at least had three usable bedrooms. It was owned by a Chinese businessman who had the most atrocious taste in furnishings. One wall in the main bedroom and a wall in a small study off the living area were painted bright royal blue. The dining chairs were covered in gold heavy wool fabric, cushions on

a circular window seat were bright green wool and a couple of other chairs in the room were covered in bright red wool. Reddish tiles covered the floor and whole effect was jarring and rather ghastly. The hot colours were the last thing we needed in the tropics. The addition of an off-white floor rug which we found in Singapore toned it all down a bit, but we had to live with the cushion covers and the dining chairs. We arranged to paint the offending walls in off-white.

Just before we moved from Nguyen Thanh Y we had a burglary. Poor Ah Fong happened to be looking for something in the fridge when the robbers burst in, pushed her head down into the fridge and one of them held her there while they went through the house. They got away with some cash in a variety of currencies, but not much else. One thing they took which annoyed us intensely was our canasta cards. These were impossible to replace in Saigon and because we quite often spent evenings playing canasta it was quite a loss. Although our intentions had been good, I don't think we had put the barbed wire on the top of the gate as we had intended, so it was obviously the way they got onto the property. Ah Fong was very shaken by this event, so, as we would need more help in the larger house we suggested she try and find a friend who would be happy to come and work for us. Ah Yang, another "black and white" amah joined us.

The servants' quarters in the new house were spacious compared with those in smaller place. We thought, in our ignorance that Ah Fong and Ah Yang would be delighted to each have a room. There was also a storage room. On moving day we gave the two money to go out and buy furniture for their rooms, and they came back with a little man with a trailer arrangement behind his bicycle on which reposed a very large flat platform with legs. This turned out to be a bed – one bed - and with it went a large flax mat – the substitute for a mattress. Along with a cupboard this was all they required and they chose to share a room and share a bed and use the other room as an ironing room. They were very happy with the arrangement and they had decided upon it themselves so who were we to query their arrangement.

The new house was good for entertaining, despite the difficult access. On one occasion we invited the boys from the army HQ to a barbecue. They were to provide a couple of half-gallon drums sawn in half for the barbecue and would also bring a variety of meat from the American PX. We provided the venue and the rest of the food and drink. It began to rain towards to end and they all trooped inside from the garden which had been rather damp before. The floors very quickly became muddy, and after they left in order to comply with the curfew we were faced with a rather large mess of beer cans, cigarette ends, empty glasses, greasy plates etc to clear up. Tomorrow is another day we thought and retired upstairs to bed. Early the next morning I could hear sounds of scrubbing and water running which seemed to be coming from outside. When I opened the doors onto the balcony off our bedroom I couldn't believe my eyes. Our two servants were on the lawn below with their trousers rolled up and they had lifted out all the charcoal which could possibly be reused and laid it neatly on the grass. Now they were scrubbing out the greasy half-gallon drums using I don't remember quite what with cold water. It seemed to be working. I don't imagine those drums had ever been, nor were they ever likely in the future, to be cleaned as well. When we went downstairs a little later, the house was immaculate and you'd never have known that just a few hours earlier it was a total disaster area.

With the arrival of Toni in the Embassy, we moved into the large room above the garage and shared this office. We also, finally, acquired a safe! This had, apparently, been removed from the Embassy in Jakarta and was now waiting in Singapore for transport to Saigon. It was arranged that the Air Force would bring it in on a Bristol. So Merv went about the business of finding someone to install it. It was to be positioned in a corner at the farthest end of the room from the front of the house so it required lifting to first floor level and moving right across the length of the room. An American construction firm gave a quote for something like \$2500 which Wellington absolutely refused to accept. So back to the drawing board. Finally, an American who was just setting up in business in Saigon said he could do it for half that price so his quote was duly accepted. The safe had to be brought from the airport in an American military vehicle – as usual - and it was dumped on a pile of sand in the driveway in front of the garage immediately below the office in which it was to be located. It had been decided that the only way to get the safe up and in was to remove

two of the window frames. The job began early one morning and an army of not very large Vietnamese workmen presented themselves ready to go. They stripped down to their shorts, and began by erecting an extremely flimsy bamboo construction which was to become the basis for a ball and tackle lifting operation. Everything seemed to be tied together with twine and, frankly, I didn't have much faith in it at all. But the Vietnamese foreman seemed to think it was just fine and they finally got to the stage where the lift could begin. Ropes were passed around the safe and the hauling process started. Inch by inch the safe rose above the ground, swinging away in the breeze and the little men gradually began to glisten with sweat. The safe finally reached the level of the window sill and then, to our horror, because it was lunchtime and time for siesta, they all disappeared leaving the safe hanging and swinging precariously in the air. Two hours or so later, they returned. A huge pile of sand was carried upstairs and placed inside on the floor beneath the window and the plan was that the safe would be swung in over the window sill and dropped into the sand. After a few good swings we felt sure the whole bamboo structure would collapse, but unbelievably, it all worked out as planned and the foreman was so overwhelmed by the success of it all, he flung his arms around Merv and positively jiggered with delight. Then the safe had to be moved right across the room and this was achieved by placing logs at regular intervals on the floor and the rolling the safe over these into the corner, placing it upright and inching it into position. What an exercise! As if we didn't have enough trauma to cope with without this sort of thing being imposed on us. It wasn't long before we realised that something else was required - a pillar of bricks in the garage immediately below the safe to act as a support and stop the floor from creaking ominously every now and then.

Much much later, we heard that the wrong safe had been sent to us. The one we received was the heavier of two available and, in fact, was considerably over the weight Bristols were allowed to carry. This knowledge conjured up visions of the bottom of the Bristol suddenly splintering and of a safe winging its way through the sky to fall on some poor unsuspecting rice farmer in the padi fields below. The consequences don't bear thinking about.

Another drama was when the lease on the Force Commander's house expired and a notification to the landlord that an extension of the lease was required was overlooked. The landlord of course wanted Colonel and Mrs Smith out of the house, because in the time they had lived there, rents had increased dramatically and he could see a far greater income for himself if he could re-let it, preferably to Americans. The Embassy lawyer, M. Jacques(?) whose lady secretary could only be described as a birdy little lady, and who hovered constantly at his side, was called upon to see what the legal position was and to try and persuade the landlord to renew the lease, but to no avail. A brief extension to allow the Smiths to find somewhere else was the compromise. But there had been a period when it seemed as though the landlord was going to evict them. Two or three of the largest Maori soldiers from the V Force sitting on the stairs and looking appropriately war like when he arrived was sufficient to change his mind.

In mid- August, a group of Members of Parliament arrived on a brief visit - three from the National Party and three from Labour. They were accompanied by John Ross from the Department of External Affairs, and Wing Commander Kelly Griffiths from the Defence Department. Having been on the receiving end of parliamentary visits before at other postings, and knowing what these groups were likely to get up to, it wasn't surprising that this one turned out to be not too different from the others. Coming from Bangkok, where they had obviously had a hectic time which included no doubt, lots of exposure to the night life of the city, they were far from ready for the realities of Vietnam. A briefing by Vietnamese military people ended with Arthur being called upon to explain why several of the MPs had dozed off during the briefing. Then came their refusal to attend a dinner to be hosted by the Minister of Foreign Affairs on the final evening of their visit. They were not interested in that and wanted instead, to fly to Singapore on Friday afternoon to enable them to do some shopping before their plane left for New Zealand on early on Sunday. Arthur was summoned to the Ministry to explain their refusal. John Ross and Kelly Griffiths were furious, the Minister was insulted, but the outcome was that the MPs very reluctantly attended the dinner and their departure from Saigon was arranged for Saturday morning. We thankfully saw them off from the airport feeling rather pleased that they weren't going to be able to swan around Singapore on a spending spree. Their lack of

interest in this part of their trip was to say the least disappointing. Sadly we heard that their flight for New Zealand had been delayed due to mechanical difficulties with the plane and so, after all, they got their wish to go shopping in Singapore.

Frank Charlton returned to New Zealand about the time we moved house and we had to say goodbye to the trusty Volkswagen. The New Zealand Air Force were to fly it home for him. This time it would fly direct so it had to be taken to Vung Tau where C130 aircraft operated flights to and from New Zealand fairly regularly. We couldn't drive to Vung Tau for security reasons and we couldn't quite figure out how we were going to get the car there. However, once again the Americans came to the rescue. The result was that I had to drive the car to a landing area out of town on the river in the direction of Bien Hoa where it would be loaded onto an amphibious landing craft and taken to Vung Tau. Merv and I set off and, fortunately, without too much difficulty, found the right place. I remember driving this very small car up the ramp of the landing craft and squeezing it in between enormous tanks. I just hoped the tanks wouldn't move because if they had, even slightly, poor Frank's car would have been no more. We heard later that it arrived safely.

In October 1967 I wrote to a friend and apologised for not having written sooner – my excuses were simply, too much work and too much socialising! I also said that I was sure I'd have died of boredom if it hadn't been for working. The women who didn't work in Saigon were involved in endless rounds of morning coffee parties, mah jong parties and, to be fair they also did a certain amount of charity work in refugee camps around the city. One or two took up Japanese scroll painting and some, who were teachers, taught in the mornings, but on the whole it was difficult to keep occupied.

I also apologised for the fact that I'd given up on birthday cards. It probably had a lot to do with being unable to read the inscriptions on anything that looked even vaguely like a "card" but it also had a lot to do with the fact that there was no joy in walking round the streets and that lately, there had been a spate of hand-bag snatching and it was all just too much effort. Parking was almost impossible to find with streets often blocked off for, perhaps, a Buddhist demonstration, or because platforms were erected for some event, or there was a party at some dignitary's house resulting in almost the whole block being cordoned off for hours before the function began.

All in all the letter was written by someone who was pretty "brassed off" with life in Saigon. Merv and I had decided that we'd had quite enough of Vietnam and looked forward immensely to our return home in December. The only light relief was the occasional trip to Singapore or Bangkok where things were quite different. I tried to remember that in some ways Saigon had more going for it than, say, Bangkok because the climate was slightly better, with pleasant cooler evenings, there were far fewer mosquitoes, and the servants were far better, but these things were insignificant when taken in the context of everything else. I think at this point, my love of living in the East had almost died. Probably, the fact that I was now pregnant, coloured my view considerably. I had begun to suspect a pregnancy in October and had taken myself off to the local French clinic for confirmation or otherwise. The French doctor's first question when I told him why I was there was "Are you married?" He seemed to breathe a sigh of relief when I said "Yes". The sale of the pill or any other birth control device was banned in Vietnam and, although I don't know what the position was regarding abortion there, I couldn't help but wonder if maybe he was often approached by desperate women seeking terminations. I must say, when the pregnancy test proved positive (and in those days some poor little rabbit had to die to prove it) I found it all rather dreamlike and a bit hard to believe. Merv and I had decided that if we were to have a family, this was a good time to start, but I hadn't expected it would happen quite so quickly. I also found it hard to believe because I didn't suffer any of the usual morning sickness or other uncomfortable symptoms. I just kept on working steadily and everyone at the Embassy was delighted to be in at the beginning of our family. The French doctor had given me calcium capsules to be taken every day. The calcium was enclosed in a tiny glass phial and a small metal saw came along with the prescription. You cut the phial in two and poured the liquid it contained into a spoon. So from then on, every morning without exception, Ah Fong placed the small phial and the saw on my bread

and butter plate and watched closely to be sure I took my medicine. She and Ah Yang were also thrilled at the news and I felt sorry that they were never going to see our baby.

It was very trying getting to and from the office from Truong Minh Giang – the distance was considerably more than from Nguyen Thanh Y and so we were faced with vast traffic jams, and the usual chaos every time we moved out of our garden. But we often opted to return home for lunch and I remember on one occasion we emerged from our gate, travelled a little way up the lane and realised that the end was blocked by a huge American Army vehicle unloading furniture into a US military office at the street end of the lane. We waited patiently for them to move the vehicle. Nothing happened. The heat mounted and our frustration grew. Merv went into the office to ask if the vehicle could be moved briefly – the response was negative. The unloading continued. Finally the truck was emptied and the driver began to move slowly out. We followed closely behind but to our amazement, the minute the truck cleared the lane, another was all set to back in and disgorge its load without allowing us to leave. Merv had already gone back into the office to try again and get somebody in authority to have the truck moved so Hoa, the driver, and I were alone in our car. When I saw what was about to happen I told Hoa to move right to the top of the lane and stop there until Merv emerged. The American driver waved his arms and shouted and demanded that we move but by this time I was so hot and bothered and furious I told Hoa to stay put and not to allow the truck in under any circumstances. Petty I suppose, but such was the arrogance of some of the American military in Vietnam that I figured it was time for us to be a bit arrogant in return.

But despite a frequent feeling of antipathy towards the American military, we did have some good personal friends from the American community and there were other occasions when one felt real compassion for youngsters in the army who should never have been there. The house in Nguyen Thanh Y was situated at the bottom angle of an L-shaped cul de sac. On the short end of the L were about three houses and then a wall. Early one evening Merv and I were sitting outside having a pre-dinner drink when a huge American army vehicle with a large trailer behind came roaring down the street. As the driver turned the corner he realised he was in a cul de sac and slammed on the brakes. The size of the truck and trailer made it impossible for him to turn in the street and so we offered to open our gate and see if that would help. The poor GI looked as though he was fresh out college – could hardly have been more than 18 or 19 and he had become separated from his convoy. In an effort to catch up he thought he saw a short-cut and took a chance on it. His shirt clung to his back and his face was dripping with sweat so we suggested he'd better have a cool drink first and then face the daunting task of turning his truck around. With a great deal of tooting and froing he finally managed the almost impossible, but our gate posts were damaged in the process. I often wondered what happened to that poor young man. The Americans ultimately paid for the repairs but I hoped the amount wasn't docked from his salary. That would have been too tough.

The electricity supply to our house in Truong Minh Giang was quite unreliable and we had frequent power cuts, the longest being for 36 hours. The worst feature of that was that we had acquired some icecream from an American friend just the day before. The water supply was often turned off or was so lacking in pressure that it barely got upstairs and the rubbish collection system had almost completely fallen down. Lots of men were employed to carry small amounts of rubbish on bicycles to a central point on a street where it was supposed to be picked up by municipal trucks. Our central point was about half a mile from our house and at times we saw rubbish piled six feet high and spreading out almost half way across the road. Periodically the Americans got organised and stirred things along – they'd provided trucks etc., but it was all quite spasmodic and one never really knew whether a collection was going to take place or not.

Thankfully we were able to have a telephone installed - by Americans under contract to USAID and the engineer who did the initial survey mentioned that there were applications as far back as 1954 to cope with. Apparently, also, when it came to the point of connecting phones, the Vietnamese wouldn't give the US engineers access to the exchange to make the final connections. Normally they got a large pay-off in bribes from individuals, but the Americans weren't paying anybody and the contract looked distinctly wobbly for a while. Thankfully, the Vietnamese finally gave in and we got our telephone.

Over the months, we had gradually accumulated more equipment in the Embassy, but it stretched the limits of the power supply to the ultimate. For example, we had an air conditioner wired to the 220 meter, linked to this was a 220 plug for the photo-copy machine, the shredding machine and the adding machine. We had to be careful not to use them all at once! Most of our equipment, having been bought in Singapore, had earth wires. In Saigon the plugs had no place for an earth so all the plugs on our equipment had the earth wire just hanging around loose. All of this, together with the air conditioner arrangement I mentioned earlier, made it a wonder we weren't electrocuted, but we all realised how precarious the wiring was and paid careful attention to handling electrical appliances. The electricity company couldn't do anything to help – they'd run out of cable or wire or places in the system or whatever.

At home, we suddenly noticed that a large gap had appeared in the tall hedge which grew above the wall surrounding our house and we were pretty annoyed. The houses around us were built by squatters and were constructed from tea chests, flattened out beer cans, ships containers, anything they could lay their hands on and the green hedge hid these from our view, although it didn't shut out the noise. The air conditioner in our bedroom was a blessed muffle for the cacophony outside. When it didn't work, we could expect pretty disturbed sleep. Merv went to investigate the gap in the hedge, and was told that "there were too many wires, there could be a fire". Well, yes, there could have been a fire, but every one of those wires was an illegal tapping into the main source and running through the hedge to avoid detection. The illegal wiring also helped to explain why our own power supply was so bad – we were no doubt supplying the locals, but we weren't prepared to go too far into that. We felt very tempted to get in touch with the electricity people and report the illegal wiring, but it would probably have been more than our peace, and maybe even safety, was worth if we had

We were never certain just how we were regarded by our neighbours. They seemed friendly enough, but one day we arrived home to find Ah Fong and Ah Yang in deep distress. Just inside the kitchen door was a row of hooks on which the keys for the house were placed. Someone had somehow gained entry to the property and stolen these keys. The only thing to do was to have new locks fitted, but before we could arrange for this the bunch of keys was thrown over the wall into the garden. That was great, but we didn't know how many copies had been made of them before they were returned, so we still went ahead and had locks changed.

We decided to hold two large buffet supper parties to say farewell to friends and workmates and these were scheduled for two consecutive Saturday evenings in December. So an order went out to Singapore well beforehand and included some of the ingredients for lasagne which I planned to serve as part of the supper on both occasions. An American friend bought cottage cheese, parmesan cheese, ice cream, cream and other perishable items from the PX – things that weren't available in the local market. On the morning of the first party a frantic Ah Fong presented me with boxes of sheets of lasagne and pointed out that they were all riddled with weevils. There was nothing else to do but sit down with a sharp pointed knife and take them all out. We ended up with interesting holy lasagne but I can say without hesitation, it didn't affect the flavour one little bit.

There were a few things we would miss about Saigon – our circle of friends, our servants and most of all, our small Siamese cat, Mimi.

We had some good friends and there were a few characters we still remember fondly. Marie Millar, the British Ambassador's secretary, who in a way was responsible for me taking the posting in Saigon after I'd heard her assurances that it was quite OK to be there, was my first contact there. She had been in Laos and came often to Bangkok on the diplomatic courier run. I'd met her then and we had kept in touch. She lived in a flat on top of the Hong Kong Shanghai Bank building over the road from the river. I'd never expected to find artificial grass in Saigon, but she had her balcony fitted with it along with some rather large dusty potted trees. A bit ludicrous but she wanted it that way and that's how it was. She managed to maintain a

remarkable level of elegance both personally and in her life style despite all the difficulties and we enjoyed her company on many occasions. We caught up with Marie again in London in 1970 but after that had only second hand news of her – not good news. She had been involved in a car crash in Paris which had permanently damaged her leg. I think, ultimately she retired from the British Foreign Service and went to live in Sydney.

Marjorie-Ellen Smith was another delight. A Canadian with their Embassy she had, we gathered, been a journalist at one stage, and some of the stories she told seemed to be a bit larger than life, making us wonder if they were true or embellished or just that, good stories. A story she told about her involvement in driving a wagon in the Calgary Stampede left us amazed and very sceptical. She never seemed to be without an American Colonel in tow, but that wasn't unusual in Saigon. At least it got us an invitation to a wonderful Thanksgiving Party one year! We met Marjorie-Ellen some years later on the street in Ottawa. She was home from a posting in Egypt and was about to return to marry an Egyptian eye specialist. That was the last we heard of her.

We got to know Ralph Estling from the American Embassy quite well too. He was a Consular officer, but he also had an extra income from writing what he described as trashy novels for the American market. "Every garbage man in New York reads my books," said Ralph. He turned out a book about every two to three weeks and it was a nice little sideline for him. He gave us a very nice antique bronze horse, which we still treasure, for a wedding present. As with many others, we didn't keep in touch after leaving Saigon.

There is an entry in my diary which reads – "Playing trains at the Moyers". Believe it or not in the Moyer household there was a whole room set aside for a model train collection. It was probably one of the most comprehensive collections we've ever seen and it seemed ludicrous that in this place, where there was always a possibility of being evacuated for one reason or another, someone had put together a set up like this. It had different levels, it had all the elements one would expect, model stations, model houses, hills and tunnels and trees and animals and fences and signals and the trains and carriages were a diverse collection probably worth a great deal. Bill Moyer was employed in Saigon by Esso, so maybe they had some special arrangements for getting their staff and their belongings out safely – I hoped so. The evening started with drinks and supper and then an adjournment by the men to the "train room". Just another way of passing time in Saigon!

There was a great contingent with the Australian Embassy who we saw a lot of and we also had good friends with the Canadian and British Embassies and to a lesser degree with people from other Embassies in Saigon.

Then there were the Chartered Bank and the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank staff. They all seemed to be great hosts who held frequent and very enjoyable parties. Most of them were bachelors and they were having a ball in Saigon in extremely nice houses provided by the banks.

When we received word that Merv's replacement was to be Jim Howell, we went ahead and made arrangements to fly out of Saigon on 19 December which would give us a few precious days in Singapore, and still allow us to get home just before Christmas. Alison and Jim were to take over our house, our servants, and more importantly, our cat, which was a great relief to us. My replacement was to be Margaret Hodgetts and Arthur, who was also leaving around the same time, was to be replaced by Paul Edmonds with his new Danish wife.

And then, believe it or not, the honey my mother had posted thirteen months before arrived. It was a bit crystallised but otherwise fine. It made great farewell gifts for friends. Along with the honey, a diplomatic bag, sent from Wellington around the same time, turned up as well. We had been regularly reminded by Wellington that we hadn't acknowledged the bag. We, just as regularly, replied that it hadn't arrived and that we didn't really expect it ever would arrive. We pointed out that sending surface mail to Saigon was a hopeless exercise and we hoped they wouldn't repeat that folly. This was very much a measure of the total

lack of understanding of those in Wellington of the situation in Vietnam. Now, finally, we sent off an acknowledgment for the bag which, fortunately, contained only information material and nothing crucial to us or the running of the Embassy. Maybe the President's mission to halt pilfering of mail had paid off after all.

I remember the Howells arriving, having spent a few hectic days in Singapore stocking up on essentials for their posting. They were highly enthusiastic about LP records they had acquired. We'd never heard of most of the artists – not even of a group called "The Seekers". We felt positively deprived and knew that it was going to be just wonderful to be part of a real life in NZ. Particularly real once our baby, due in late May, arrived!

On the morning of 19 December we arrived early at Tan Son Nhut airport with many friends in tow plus champagne and glasses so that our departure could be celebrated appropriately. I can still remember the feeling of enormous relief as we finally took off from Saigon. The eighteen months I had been there probably made more of an impact on me than any other posting I have ever had. I'd dearly love to go back to Vietnam now and, hopefully, find a country and people at peace at last.