

# Chapter Twenty-Five

## Vietnam: Spring, 1939

**April, 1939**

The USS Canopus began its voyage to Saigon<sup>1</sup>. The men on board enjoyed perfect cruising weather with the South China Sea “as calm as a mill pond” and with “cool breezes to lull us asleep at night.” (*April 25*). It had been three days since they left Manila, and Herb begins writing.

*Hello honey! Might as well start a letter, even though we won't get rid of any mail until we get to Hong Kong. And that is when we get our first batch of mail.*

*We tie up at Saigon around noon tomorrow. This morning and all day long so far we have been in sight of land, the part of Indo China that juts out into the sea along our southwesterly course.*

*Got a little exercise the last couple of afternoons. They have a handball net rigged up on the movie platform so we can play handball at sea. There is a place for deck tennis and another place for the weight lifters; and on the stern of the ship there is a place for clay pigeons to be shot; so all in all you see it's quite a pleasure cruise.*

*Just about fell over yesterday when the Supply Officer handed me a compliment. It was because when I was engaged in entering in my ledgers yesterday morning, some material (oil), that had been bought and paid for in Manila; I discovered that only half the bill had been paid, an error which had slipped through the Supply Office here. ... He complimented me on finding it.*

*And yesterday I finished putting in my course for second class storekeeper so now I'll be eligible to take the exam in July. However, since I got rated on last October's exam, my papers won't go in to the flagship until this October (you have to have a year in rating). ... On account of the old fellows involved ahead of me, I'd have to be exceptionally lucky to make second class out here before I go back to the states.*

*(April 25)*

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<sup>1</sup> The city was re-named Ho Chi Minh City in 1975.

## Saigon<sup>2</sup>

A couple days later Herb writes about his trip into the city.

*Yesterday morning as per schedule, we arrived at the mouth of the Saigon River<sup>3</sup> where we picked up our pilot. He took us on up the zig-zagging river at a pretty fast pace and around 10 A.M. we reached Saigon. There wasn't much to see on the way up. Just green marshy banks and a lot of swampy land.*

*I didn't even intend to go ashore yesterday but after supper I went up to talk to Mike and we got a sudden notion to go ashore so in about five minutes flat we had our dress whites on and we dashed over the gangway into the 6:30 boat.*

*The first thing we did was to jump in a rickshaw and go to an army canteen where we heard they sold champagne. It wasn't long before we were seated at a table with a quart of the precious fluid before us and a French soldier opened the bottles. ... So with a toast to France and U.S.A. Mike and I downed our first champagne.*

*Then we started riding around in rickshaws. Saigon, even in the dusk seemed to be a very clean and modern little city. ... We finally found a cabaret where we danced a few dances with Chinese girls. They couldn't dance to the American music very well though, which the band played as a favor to us. They are used to dancing to French music from records. (April 27)*

Then he reassures Louise of his love and faithfulness.

*I love you terribly much. Ask Mike! Every time I get feeling good, at times I have a temporary reaction and I tell him about my wonderful sweetheart so far, far away. You know honey; this is about the farthest away I've ever been from you. Around nine thousand miles away! And I think of you as much as ever. Lord, even more. At times I realize how very much I want you and need you darling and its almost maddening.*

*It's getting easier all the time to be true to you. I mean when I go ashore, like here; and travel around with my buddies and see pretty women, they say there are lots of cute French girls here; they don't even appeal to me any more than does the rest of the scenery. I don't even think of them in the same respect that my buddies might.*

*(April 27)*

The next evening Herb explains his slow-down in letter-writing.

*The main reason I think that I haven't been writing so often lately is that I don't hang around this office here much at all any more in my spare time. I don't get along so well*

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<sup>2</sup> In 1939, Vietnam was a French territory. In 1945, Japan ousted the French from Vietnam. Then when Japan surrendered to allied forces in September 1945, Ho Chi Minh declared independence of Vietnam from France. In 1946 the Viet Minh (supported by Chinese Communists) began an eight-year war with France (supported by the United States). Vietnam was divided into two countries, North and South, in 1954.

<sup>3</sup> This river is now known as Soai Rap.

*with the fellows in here, and since all my buddies work in offices on upper decks I'm usually up there talking or doing one thing or another.*

*The office is different here on a cruise with all the fellows on board every night. In Manila the married men were always ashore every night and it wasn't so crowded. So that makes it hard to write too. (April 28)*

Herb shares with Louise his observations of Saigon.

*It's more or less a French naval base; but it's a very busy port too with about a dozen merchant ships tied up along the banks in here. And since the river winds around the city, it looks funny when you look across rice fields and see ships that seem to be perched over in a rice field, when it is really the river that curves so much. Population – about 150,000 I believe. Mostly Chinese; but there are quite a few French residents here too. (April 28)*

## **May, 1939**

Three days later, Monday afternoon, Herb again has much to write to Louise about.

*Saturday, I went ashore at one o'clock and had a pretty good time. First, we went out to the large zoo here where they have a pretty good collection of tropical animals and birds. ... Then we ... had a quart of excellent champagne and went on down town where we each bought a stack of postcards. Then we went up to the post office and wrote and mailed them. ... It was late in the afternoon by then so we had supper and then went out to the army canteen and drank champagne with some French sailors and soldiers for a couple of hours. We caught the last boat back to the ship at midnight feeling pretty good. (May 1)*

Herb was assigned patrol duty for all day and evening on Sunday. "We had to go ashore with the usual belt, leggings, club, and brassard at 10 A.M." (May 1)

*During the day we casually patrolled the main streets stopping here and there for a rest and soft drink once in a while.*

*At seven o'clock we really went on watch. Oooh, what a watch I drew. I was stationed at the landing where I had to assist fellows who were too "ossified" to get down on the pier and into the boats. And settle disputes over payments with rickshaw boys. And to keep the fellows from catching sampans [which was against orders] or falling in the river. What a tiresome, pesky watch it was, from seven until midnight.*

*Rickshaws would pull up to the landing with fellows "out cold" in them. And I'd drag them down on a dock and lay them out in a corner. Or a French army truck would pull up with a sailor inside who had "one too many" and we'd carry him down on the dock. Every hour a motor launch would come in and I'd have to wake them all up and tumble the helpless ones into the boats.*

*A couple of fellows caught a sampan when I wasn't looking and a few yards out in the stream one fellow fell half way in so when I yelled for them to come back, they did and I bawled them out.*

After his watch Herb finally got into his cot to sleep. "Our office here is right by the gangway which all the boats come alongside, coming in from the beach. About ten minutes after I turned in, I heard a slight commotion near the ship" (May 1).

Four sailors missed the last boat back to the ship, so they hired a Chinese sampan. Due to the swift tide in the river and the antics of the drunken sailors, the sampan turned over and sank. "A boat was quickly called out and sent after them and the big searchlights on the ship were turned on the muddy water" (May 1).

One of the sailors was never found. "He was a second-class merchant mate who had a knack of getting in trouble since he drank a lot; his wife is out here in Shanghai waiting to meet him" (May 1).

*But honey, I'm telling you; after that watch I stood over on the deck, I can assure you that these fellows ask for all the trouble they run into. They fairly beg for it the way they carry on, and what happens to them is entirely their own fault. But I feel sorry for his wife. Those fellows knew it was against orders to hire a sampan. They were drunk, overleave, and to top it off they had to be noisy and rock the sampan. (May 1)*

The next day the Canopus is on its way up the coast, bound for Haiphong. He explains "The main reason for our stop is to drop off the truck we have on board" (May 2).

Herb notes that they found the body of the sailor who drowned last night. He writes:

*It's all very unfortunate but you would be shocked to see how lightly most sailors look at death. They can joke about it and what not. But then ... we are supposed to be that way. We are, after all, standing by for an emergency, for instance war; wherein our lives would be the last of our worries. However, that eventuality is remote darling. (May 2)*

## **Hai Phong<sup>4</sup>**

Three days later they arrive at Haiphong. Herb writes "Our weather got a little cooler last night and this morning all morning we had sort of a cool haze almost like the morning fog off the coast of California which brought memories back to most of us" (May 5).

*Also this morning we started running into junks fishing off the coast near here. Around noon we picked up the pilot and proceeded a short way up a river to Haiphong here. Everything along the shores was very green and you could see large rice fields here and there. (May 5)*

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<sup>4</sup> The port at Hai Phong is the leading seaport of North Vietnam. It is not far from Hanoi, and slightly westward of Ha Long Bay.

*We are tied up to a very long pier which right now is cluttered up with merchant men of all sorts who have their wares spread out all over the dock. [Photo below] Then there were a flock of laundrymen and they let a couple of them come on board to pick up our laundry. I sure was glad to see them. (May 5)*



On Saturday Herb and Mike went ashore. They bought postcards, went to a hotel to write out the cards, then to a post office to mail them, and then they had a bite to eat. (May 6)



**Above: Post Office in Haiphong**



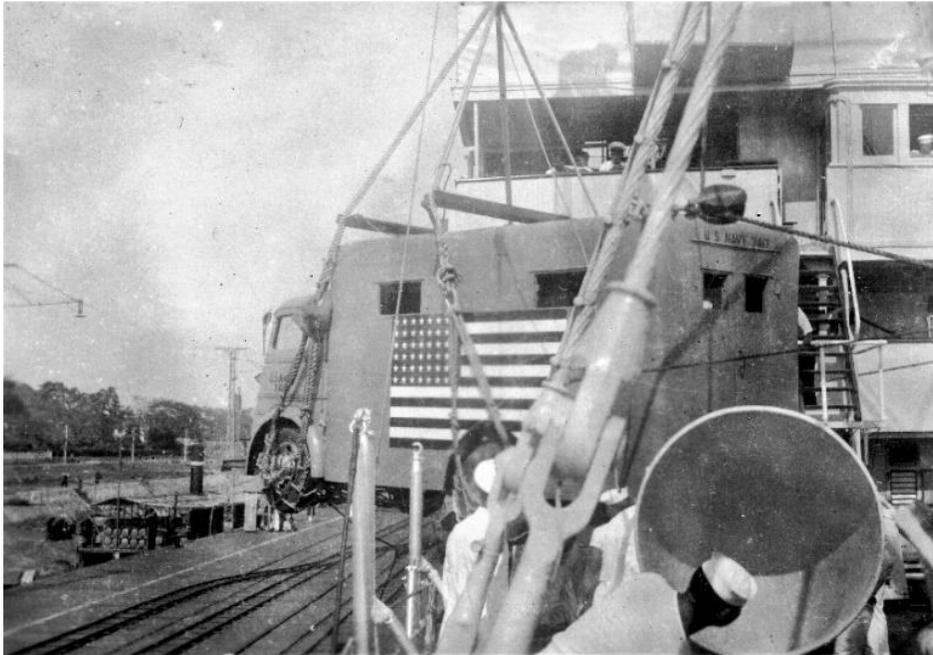
**Above: Marketplace in Hai Phong**

*We got a kick out of watching the sampans alongside the ship all day long too. Whole families were in some of them; but they seemed fairly content. They would yell up for coins, or food, or any junk that you could throw them. But they have a terribly low standard of living. Babies just crawl around the bottoms of the boats like animals and if they cry or anything, no one even notices them. Ma and Pa are too busy with their dip nets and oars. (May 9)*



**Above: Haiphong Waterfront**

*Haiphong is a pretty busy port right now because it is one of the few sources of supply for the Chinese government. They send stuff here via truck overland to Chungking, the Chinese capital. We unloaded the truck we had, yesterday and now it is all set for its trip. It's a nice looking, streamlined affair with big [American] flags painted on the sides and top. (May 9)*



**Below: Ha Long Bay, just up the coast from the mouth of the river leading to Haiphong.**



Herb tells Louise how he feels about this portion of their cruise, and what is in store for them further north.

*In a week from today we'll be in Hong Kong and then we'll get lots of mail. Oh boy! I can't hardly wait. Sweetie, it's awful not being able to hear from you for so long. There's just one drawback about getting mail in Hong Kong though. I'll get a huge stack of invoices from Cavite which will keep me busy for a week. (May 5).*

*We are all pretty glad to be getting away from Haiphong. It got terribly hot during the day; and in the evenings the lights would draw a million bugs; moths, mosquitoes, etc. (May 9)*