August in An Thai

J. David Prince*

*Iowa State University

Copyright ©1968 by the authors. Sketch is produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress).
http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/sketch
THE DUSTY little Vietnamese village was hot in the early August morning. The thatched huts, the nearly-completed hospital unit I was building, the temporary hospital tent, even the red dust, were all suffocating in the hot and heavy air.

I was waiting for a fellow AID worker to come from Chu Lai with a jeep. The two of us were in charge of construction for the village's new hospital, using native labor when it was available, which it often was not. We were going to Da Nang for the weekend in order to file a progress report, order some things, and relax.

I trudged over to the hospital tent to chat with the medic who lived in the village and treated its ills in between the visits of a regular doctor. I wrote a short letter home while he finished setting up for the day.

"That was a damned short letter."

"Oh, I thought I'd just send a short note home before I took off. I could probably write a book before those two jokers get here."
It was getting hot in the tent already and it was only mid-morning.

"Who's coming after you?" Cod asked.

"Foreman and a World War Two jeep, I guess. I'll be lucky if he doesn't get a bicycle," I said.

"You're lucky to be getting out of here. I've gotta dish out pills all day in this damned tent."

"You should've been a doctor, Cod—a dedicated man like yourself."

"Well, if you slow bastards would ever get that so-called hospital done, Doc Collins and I could enjoy a little of the easy life. Every time you go to Da Nang you bring back more beer and less concrete or whatever."

"Now we told you it'd be done before he gets back here again, so just sit back and think how nice that air-conditioned little beauty is going to be next month."

It was "health day" in An Thai. Once a week, a doctor came to the village to give shots, hand out pills, and give examinations. He also gave candy to the kids. There was never a shortage of patients—especially kids.

One of our favorites was Salamander. How he got that name I'll never know. Anyway, I remember the first time he came to the AID tent for a penicillin injection. His face was distorted with the imagined pain and his tears, mixed with the red dust, muddied his brown cheeks. Doc Collins had given him a Hershey bar and his mood changed considerably. As a matter of fact, he had tried for a second shot that same afternoon and nearly succeeded. Cod recognized him and chased him out.

He also spent quite a bit of time around the new hospital construction site. I'd given him one of my AID tee-shirts, which fit him at least twice, and it wasn't long before he assumed the job of official messenger and general scavenger for our crew. He rarely went off on a mission without first securing the promise of one kind of chocolate or another.

Salamander was like most of the younger kids in An Thai: friendly and distant at the same time. His older brother was a Vietcong who spent some time in the village, but, like the others in that age group, left us alone. After all, we were
hanging out medicine and food and building a hospital for their village. That must have been more important to them than destroying the projects and their propaganda value for the Americans. Besides, we couldn't prove they were VC.

"Let's go grab some fresh air while we wait for your jeep."

We slipped out of the oven-like tent.

"Just like Main Street, huh?" Cod remarked.

The village did look peaceful but the war was never far from any place one could go. Highway One was only two and one-half miles west, and the First Marines, along with their planes from Da Nang and Chu Lai, kept the area pretty noisy. Every day I looked at the village and its people, everything seemed so new. I'd developed the habit of forgetting all I could from day to day and the hospital job seemed like any small construction job at home might seem.

"What's gonna do up there besides consume cold beer?" asked Cod.

"Well, I'm gonna think how miserable you are back here for one thing, and for another, I'm gonna see a couple people I know."

"Oh yeah. Who's that?"

"One guy is a friend of mine from school. He's in the hospital up there recovering from a little shrapnel wound, and the other guy is an F-4 pilot at Da Nang."

"Well, if Charlie gets you on the way up, come on back and I'll fix you up with some of my Scotch tape."

Salamander stopped by, and after determining that I was leaving for the day, asked if I wouldn't like him to guard my equipment.

"I already arranged for the others to work today," I explained. His face fell, but only briefly. I could see the wheels turning.

"Then I guard them," he offered.

"Okay," I agreed. The chocolate reward was a silent arrangement by this time.

"He'll probably sell all your shovels," Cod observed.

"I don't doubt it. Those birds I got to work for me today will probably decide to take the day off before I'm a mile out of town, too. I really don't give a damn, if you wanna know."
“Why how can you say that?” Cod chuckled. “These poor people struggling to build a free democracy with their bare hands? Why, they'll be busy as bees. Probably work on into the night.”
“Bullshit!”
“Well, we'll all be out of here soon and then we can think about all this and laugh.”
A crackle from the road indicated the jeep was coming and a cloud of red dust soon confirmed its arrival. The dust covered everything and made one wish for rain. When it rained, the red mud made you wish things would dry up.
“I'm getting out of here now,” I said. “I'll drink a brew for ya if you don't let Salamander sell my cement mixer to the Chinese!”
The jeep seat was scorching.
“Hi, Jim. See we got a footman today.”
“Yeah, they thought we should have a bodyguard,” the jeep driver replied.
Sergeant Holland was always pleasant to have along. The Marines usually sent him and a radio with us more as a matter of form than for any real protection.
“You still haulin' that shotgun everyplace you go?” the sergeant asked.
“Well don't be offended, but I feel a hell of a lot safer that way,” I kidded.
“Don't take any candy from Charlie.”
“Right, Cod. Have a nice day making friends for America.”
“You just don't forget to come back for your last five weeks or I won't have anybody to laugh at.”
I didn't forget, but I have forgotten most of it now because it all seemed so wasteful and meaningless. I don't think about An Thai often because I'd like to forget all of it. But I'll never forget the gritty red dust that followed our jeep to Da Nang and muddied Salamander's cheeks.