

DATELINE: BANGKOK

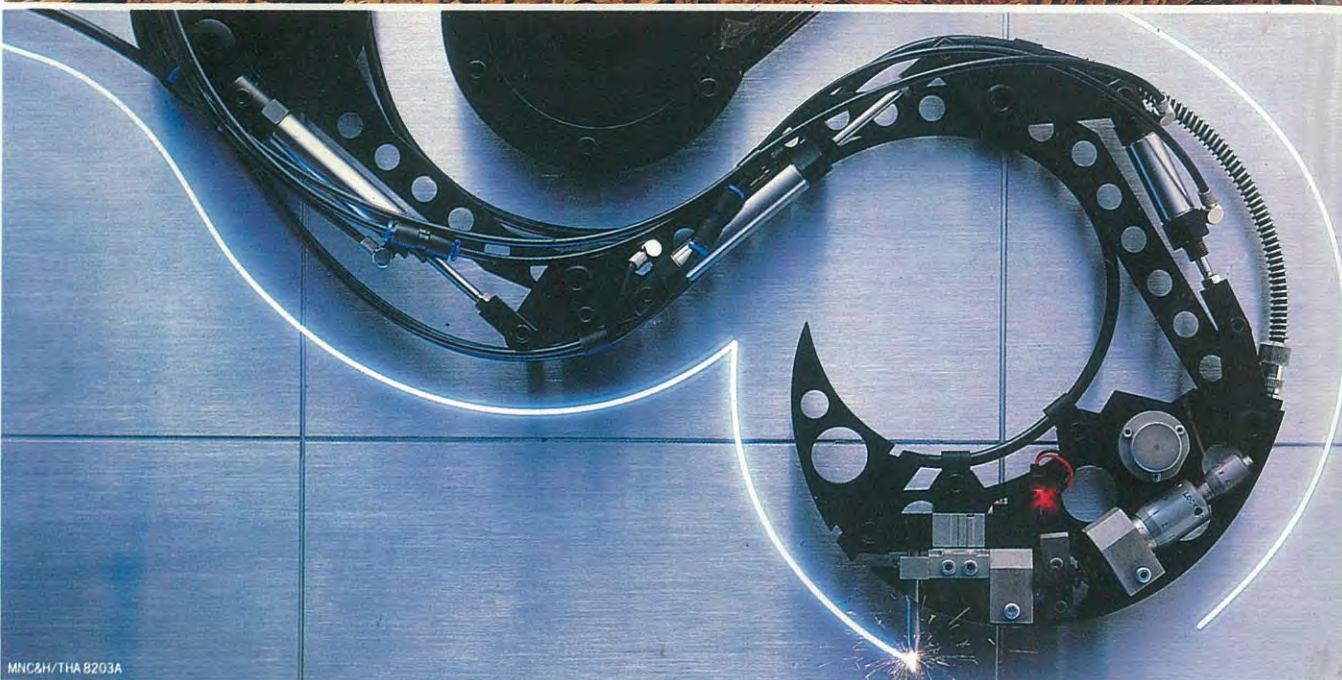
THE FOREIGN CORRESPONDENTS CLUB OF THAILAND MAGAZINE

1ST QUARTER 1991

2 LINTNERS VISIT BURMA
16 REPORTING VIETNAM
20 TASS REMEMBERS

1 CLUB NEWS/LETTER
14 CLUB NEWS/PARTY
24 CLUB NEWS/DIARY





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CLUB NEWS LETTER FROM THE BOARD

WITH Christmas so well integrated into the Thai festive calendar, the FCCT like everywhere else closed 1990 festooned in tinsel and fairy lights. The children's party was well attended, and our distinctly American Santa managed to make his dramatic window entrance without falling off the roof. Club Manager Eric Brighton performed stoically in the role of chief elf among the cheerful chaos. Our second Christmas dinner was also a popular draw, confirming it as a red letter annual event.

Agence France Presse's compact but enterprising deputy bureau chief, Erskine McCullough, deserves congratulations for getting the FCCT Golf Society out on to the fairways in so little time. Efkins (as one Thai secretary calls him) not only identified a solid corps of members interested in supporting the society, but pulled off a delightful coup by persuading golf's greatest ambassador, Jack Nicklaus, to become its Honorary President.

Further improvements to the clubhouse have been made. Upgrading of the reception and reading area should be completed by early February. After that, the existing lounge seating will be replaced with comfortable upholstered chairs that are more upright and economical in terms of floor space. Plans are also being made to consolidate the buffet as a sideboard, to enlarge the bar and to move the billiard table. The intention is to divide the clubhouse more clearly into reading, dining, games and bar/meeting areas so that there is less overall disturbance to individual members as they use the club. Donations to the Clubhouse Improvement Fund are still coming in, and a brass plaque is being prepared.

The Executive Committee has also approved investment (if necessary) in a satellite dish that will provide access to a 24-hour news

also approved investment (if necessary) in a satellite dish that will provide access to a 24-hour news channel beamed down by satellite. Discussions are just getting under way to discover how this overlaps with the Dusit Thani's own plans for such a facility, and where the dish might be located.

Unfortunately, last year took a heavier toll than usual on correspondents. Nate Thayer of Associated Press and David McKaige of Visnews have fortunately both recovered from serious bouts of malaria contracted while on assignment inside Cambodia. Asia magazine's Ted Dunfee is back in Vancouver awaiting transfer from hospital to a rehabilitation centre. He is in a wheelchair, and has not yet recovered the use of his fingers or legs, but is making steady progress with is speech — even to the point of uttering the occasional expletive. Ted's memory is gradually coming back, and he was sufficiently improved to be able to enjoy a special party at Christmas.

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation's Nick Stuart is also making slow but definite progress from the injuries he sustained here late last year in a car crash. Doctors at the Royal Ryde Rehabilitation Centre in Sydney predict a long haul of perhaps six to eight months before he is well enough to be considered for work again. ABC are meanwhile covering his beat out of Singapore and keeping the job open for him in Bangkok.

We wish both Ted and Nick the speediest and fullest possible recoveries, and also offer the incoming Executive Committee and its subcommittees the best of luck in 1991. Their first test will be getting the 1991 Membership Director out on time. □

Hsi-Hsinwan

In this excerpt from his recent book, Land of Jade, FCCT member Bertil Lintner describes a battle in Burma's forgotten war

5 NOVEMBER, 1986. Hseng Noun, Hseng Tai and I had spent more than a year in northern Burma. We had trekked across the wild Naga Hills of northern Sagaing Division, the home of headhunters until only a few years ago, crossed the Chindwin River, the Hukawng Valley and the rugged Kumon Range, a territory which to most people who had ever heard of it belonged to World War Two, the Chindits and the Wingate expeditions. Eventually, we reached the Kachin rebel headquarters at Pa Jau near the Sino-Burmese frontier where we remained for six months, over the rainy season. When the rains came to an end in October, we marched again, south to Shan State and areas controlled by the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) as well as the now defunct Communist Party of Burma (CPB). We were now staying at Man Pi camp, and our host was Lt-Gen Seng Hpung of the KIA. Our daughter Hseng Tai was 14 months old and taking her first steps — and the CPB's well-armed units, commanded by Kyi Myint, were about to launch their most spectacular assault in many years on a government position on a mountain called Hsi-Hsinwan.

YOU'VE arrived at the right moment," Seng Hpung said sipping his coffee from a white enamel mug. He was relaxed, the laces of his army boots undone. "The CPB is going to attack Hsi-Hsinwan on 16th November. The date's been changed. And we've decided to assist them by ambushing the reinforcements Ma Sa La most certainly is going to send in. And just before the main attack, the CPB also intends to ambush a convoy on the Burma Road. On the 9th. It's just to create confusion and to give the local Ma Sa La commanders a scare."

The dense jungle, the presence of several allied rebel forces and the relative proximity to government positions on the Burma Road lent an unusual tension to the Man Pi camp. There may also have been a more prosaic reason: we soon discovered the place to be plagued with swarms of mosquitoes which zeroed in for the attack in short order. We were bitten all over and within a few days at the base, Hseng Tai's face was blotched and swollen. Predictably, malaria was rampant in the area and we hoped the protection Hseng Noun, who was taking anti-malaria tablets, passed on to the baby in her milk would be sufficient. At night, we were careful to cover Hseng Tai with a mosquito net, but in the daytime it was necessary to fan the voracious little creatures away with a handkerchief or a banana leaf. She was now 14 months old and growing fast. It was during our stay at Man Pi that to our satisfaction, she took her first steps.

Sunday, 9th November brought rain. The drizzle continued into the afternoon and water dripped down from the foliage that covered the camp, making the paths muddy and slippery. The 4th Brigade's propagan-

da team was practising on stage: the sound of patriotic songs accompanied by electric guitars floated through the jungle. I sat on a bamboo chair outside our hut, updating my diaries while Hseng Noun played with the baby, encouraging her to attempt the novelty of walking. Then, at 2.15, the sound of heavy guns rang out from the direction of the Burma Road. The band continued playing and the beat of the music intermingled with the echo of distant recoilless rifle fire and mortar explosions. Seng Hpung came hurrying up the path towards our house, his face crinkled in a smile.

"Can you hear? I think that ambush business is going on."

It was indeed. The CPB, it transpired, had decided to go ahead with an attack on a government convoy returning from Muse near the border to the garrisons in Kutkai and Lashio, further down the Burma Road. Opinions had differed on the advisability of the ambush. Seng Hpung had argued it would alert the Burma army and probably lead to a reinforcement of the undermanned government outposts in the area — thereby making the later, main thrust against Hsi-Hsinwan even more difficult. The CPB, on the other hand, had maintained that if successful, the ambush would demoralise government forces and so make it easier to capture Hsi-Hsinwan.

My own feeling was that the CPB was overestimating its own strength while underestimating the Burma army. In the years I had been covering the civil war, I had learned considerable respect for the army's fighting capabilities. Certainly, it was ruthless in its treatment of civilians in the frontier areas — a policy that was highly counter-productive both politically and militarily. It also suffered ex-

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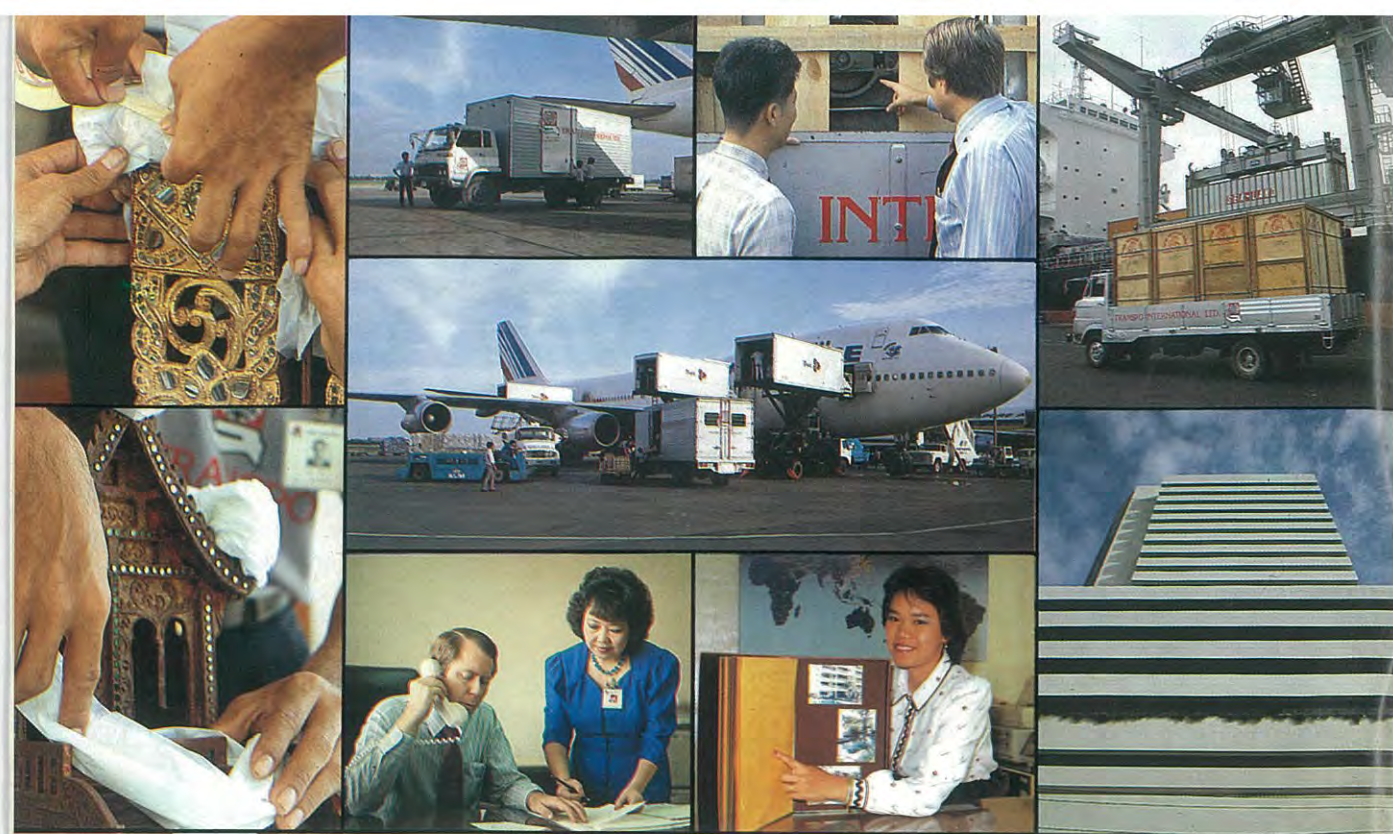
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tremely heavy casualties due to poor medical support and inadequate logistics. But it remained an effective and highly experienced military machine with a courage and stamina probably unique in the Southeast Asian region.

The shooting in the distance continued for about half an hour before the guns fell silent. It was not until the following day a report came in to Man Pi. The rains had hampered the manoeuvrability of the ambush party and apart from damaging one truck and wounding a few government soldiers, the heavy bombardment had achieved nothing substantial. I was thus somewhat apprehensive about the imminent attack on Hsi-Hsinwan. If these were results against a convoy on the move, how would the communists fare against government forces dug into well prepared fixed positions?

LLEFT Man Pi camp on 14th November with a section of KIA troops. The day was clear and the mountains of Kokang glimmered blue in the east across the Salween River. Amid the rugged hills, the Shan valleys of Mong Hom and Mong Ya lay like lush green oases. The walk was pleasant, mostly downhill and so less strenuous than on our arrival at Man Pi. When we reached Mong Paw in the afternoon, people in the valley were harvesting paddy by hand with sickles. Grazing water-buffaloes lumbered along paths between the fields. It was a sadly improbable setting for the major clash of arms which was about to take place. As he had promised, Zau Naw was waiting to serve a delicious Chinese meal before we continued our march to the camp at the old mission compound.

Kyaw Nyunt had arrived from Panghsai to act as my guide and interpreter. Some other CPB intellectuals in their early thirties joined us that night for some moonshine in the camp, and we talked until late about the war. Most of them had joined the CPB during its heyday in the early 1970s and appeared wedded to the politics of Mao Zedong's Great Prole-



tarian Cultural Revolution. I inquired discreetly as to their views of the CCP today but received only embarrassed smiles in reply. They were far more interested in questioning me about a trip I had made in 1982 with the communist New People's Army in the Philippines.

An eerie quiet hung over the Mong Paw valley on 15th November. In the afternoon, hundreds of CPB soldiers marched into the camp, festooned with belts of ammunition and laden with the tools of their trade: automatic rifles, machine-guns, bazookas, hand grenades. Some units arrived in ancient Chinese army trucks which groaned up the dirt road to the old mission compound. In the distance, the sinister bulk of Hsi-Hsinwan loomed dark against the sky. Several CPB brigades had been mobilised for what was to be the most massive display in years of the communists' still impressive firepower. Columns of troops and trucks crammed with men and munitions moved past well into the evening. Kyaw Nyunt and I sat under some cherry trees, planted by the Japanese during the Second World War, and watched the spectacle in silence.

Kyi Myint was busy organising

troop deployments, but during a break in his duties he called us over to a long, wooden building. Inside, we were shown a scale-model of Hsi-Hsinwan made from mud and sand. Forest patches were marked with green leaves on the hillsides, while small paper flags in different colours marked the Burma army's positions. Red cardboard arrows indicated various axes of attack. Apart from Kyi Myint, there were also some other ethnic Chinese officers whom I recognised from Panghsai — and Ohn Kyi, the impassioned theoretician.

As the officers explained for my benefit how the assault was to be conducted, I could not but notice one point: no exit had been left for the army's retreat. I remembered a line from the 2,000 year-old Chinese classic, *The Art of War* by philosopher Sun Tzu: "It is military doctrine that an encircling force must leave a gap to show the surrounded troops there is a way out, so that they will not be determined to fight to the death." I asked one of the officers why they were not observing an unquestionably wise maxim. Pursing his mouth and gesturing with a wide, sweeping motion of his right hand, he gave me less an answer than a statement of intent:

"We intend to wipe them out completely. There'll be no survivors."

I refrained from further questions, simply studying the model of the mountain. It was clear that preparations had been meticulous, and Kyi Myint was eager to let me know all the details.

"We've prepared our people for this for months. The rice harvest is almost over, so the fighting won't interrupt that. And we must secure the trade route to Panghsai. From Hsi-Hsinwan, they sometimes fire rockets even at Mong Paw market."

What was remarkable was that this planning and logistical preparation had been going on under the noses of the army units holding the mountain-top — and there was nothing to suggest they had got wind of it. Arms, ammunition and medicines had been stockpiled, hundreds of troops moved around, bamboo stretchers for the wounded made, and civilians had prepared rations — rice with meat and vegetables wrapped in banana leaves. And on Hsi-Hsinwan, only a few kilometres away, government troops were probably even now playing cards or writing letters to families and friends.

Kyaw Nyunt and I left the camp in the evening by jeep. It was already dark as we drove out of Mong Paw, towards Nam Tao and the Burma Road. The headlights fell on columns of CPB troops trudging along the dirt road heavily laden with weapons, mortar bombs and other ammunition. Village militiamen in civilian clothes walked in pairs carrying stacks of bamboo stretchers; casualties, apparently, were expected to be heavy. I had never before seen such a concentration of troops and weaponry in Burma's jungle war. This was no guerrilla band on its way to some hit-and-run raid, but a regular army moving men and material up to the start-lines of a conventional operation. Dark green Chinese-made army trucks roared past in clouds of swirling dust. Our own jeep laboured up steep inclines

where the road led across the eastern flanks of Hsi-Hsinwan.

We left the jeep at a crest just below the CPB's position on Hill One. While we sat on the grass, quietly puffing on cheroots, long lines of men carrying munitions toiled along a path leading further up the mountain. Every now and then, more trucks halted and young soldiers unloaded wooden boxes of small arms ammunition, rockets, mortar bombs and grenades. Some of them hid empty boxes in the forest.

I asked what they were doing. "They can use the boxes at home later on," replied Kyaw Nyunt, adding with his usual giggle, "But who knows who's going to return alive from this mountain?"

WHEN the full moon had risen over the mountain, we joined the line of troops. The only sound was the slow, rhythmic shuffling of hundreds of feet and the measured panting of weary men. It was almost 10 o'clock before we reached a well-sheltered, natural platform on the eastern slopes, screened by trees with a steep rockface behind it. This was a safe forward base where ammunition was stockpiled and the wounded could be treated. As well as the human porters, came mules carrying 82 and 120 mm mortar tubes, base plates, 75 mm recoilless rifles, and heavy anti-aircraft machine-guns. By means of recently strung-out field telephones and walkie-talkies, some officers kept in touch with units further up the line; others held eleventh-hour conferences over large scale maps. Radio tubes, base plates, 75 mm recoilless rifles, and heavy anti-aircraft machine-guns. By means of recently strung-out field telephones and walkie-talkies, some officers kept in touch with units further up the line; others held eleventh-hour conferences over large scale maps. Radio

operators were assembling equipment to monitor enemy communications traffic between Hsi-Hsinwan and the garrisons at Mong Ya, Namhpakka and Kutkai on the Burma Road.

During the opening rounds of the fighting at least, the Burmese would be heavily outnumbered and outgunned. Only 130 government troops were stationed on the mountain — and the CPB front-line assault force was close to 1,000. In addition, other units had been sent down to the Burma Road to block reinforcements. The crucial question on which the final outcome of the battle would likely turn centred on the latter. To capture the mountain would not be that difficult: but if reinforcements succeeded in breaking through the communist blocking force and were supported by heavy artillery and aircraft, the CPB might well find itself thrown back onto the defensive.

Kyaw Nyunt and I had brought a blanket each, which we unrolled on layers of banana leaves; we did not even bother to put up a simple lean-to. It was freezing, but, fortunately, Kyaw Nyunt had a bottle of Chinese brandy in his bag which we shared along with a packet of cream crackers before wrapping ourselves in our blankets and going to sleep.

The pre-dawn chill woke us at 4 am the next morning. We sat up bleary-eyed on our blankets and finished what was left of our crackers. Fifteen minutes later, the muffled sound of explosions erupted in the far distance. Kyaw Nyunt and I glanced at each other apprehensively. Suddenly, we discovered Kyi Myint was standing beside us.

"Did you hear that?" he said, whispering out of excitement rather than necessity. "Our forces just blew some bridges on the Burma Road to prevent reinforcements from getting here when we attack."

Shivering, we left the forward base at 5 am, walking uphill towards a command post from which Kyi

Myint was to co-ordinate the assault. We reached it before dawn. Located in one of the few forested spots on the otherwise denuded Hsi-Hsinwan massif, it was sheltered by large, jagged rocks which looked as if they might prove useful in the event of airstrikes.

The clouds had not yet lifted from the Mong Paw valley to the south, and Hsi-Hsinwan looked even more menacing in the waning moonlight. We sat huddled between the rocks, and Kyi Myint pointed out the four heights along the spine of the mountain. The first assault was to hit Hill Four, the weakest army position where only two sections or about twenty soldiers were posted. Nearly 200 CPB troops were already approaching it in the dark, moving silently up the steep, bare mountainside.

"As soon as they open fire on Hill Four, our heavy weapons unit on Hill One will bombard it with 120 mm mortars. The first rifle fire will be just the signal; only when the camp has been blown to pieces will the infantry storm it. Then they'll move on to the other positions which we'll capture one after the other."

We sat down to wait. Kyi Myint busied himself keeping in touch with his frontline commanders over a walkie-talkie; the field telephones linked him to support units in the rear and the forward base where we had slept.

At 5.15, the crackle of small arms fire broke from Hill Four. It was still dark, and the muzzleflashes sparked like fireworks around the summit. Within seconds, a massive barrage of B-40 rockets, fired from Hill One, arced across the mountain trailing streamers of fire behind them. Then followed the sharp crack of recoilless rifles and the flashes of impacting rounds. But the 120mm mortars, the mainstay of communist firepower, had yet to open up. Kyi Myint was screaming in Chinese over his walkie-talkie. I asked Kyaw

Nyunt what the matter was.

"The heavy weapons unit says the situation's not clear. They don't want to open fire."

"I thought they'd been given an order."

He shrugged. It appeared that in an army where everybody was yebaw, or comrade, and ranks did not exist, some points of command and control remained to be ironed out. Whether this was the best time or place to do it was another matter. Furious, Kyi Myint was again shrieking and cursing into the walkie-talkie. Finally, there was a roar from Hill One as the first 120 mm mortar went off. The round exploded right on the summit of Hill Four. It was followed by another; and another; and yet another.

Dawn broke at 6 am to reveal a tattered pall of smoke and dust billowing from Hill Four; the position was literally being blown apart by the bombardment. Fifteen minutes later, a green flare exploded above the hill and seemed to hang suspended, a ghostly splash of colour against the sombre half-light of dawn. I looked enquiringly at Kyaw Nyunt.

"Signal to the heavy weapons unit to cease fire. The infantry are going in."

Almost as he spoke, a sudden storm of automatic weapons fire burst out around the embattled summit. The intensity of the firing seemed to rise and fall and rise again to a crescendo. Abruptly, the radio operator, headphones on, looked up. He called out something in Chinese and the people at the command post broke into wild cheering. Kyaw Nyunt translated:

"Hill Four has fallen. Our forces are already in the bunkers and trenches. Most of the enemy have been killed and the survivors have fled to the headquarters hill."

All attention was now directed towards Hills Two and Three, which were already under simultaneous bombardment. Watching through

INSIGHT GUIDES

ARE GOING PLACES:



borrowed field-glasses I could see black and brown smoke swirling around the features as one shell, rocket or mortar bomb after another slammed in. The punishment continued relentlessly for about an hour. Then, another message came in, this time an intercept of Burmese radio traffic.

"They're asking for reinforcements. Two companies are on their way from Mong Yu and Namhpakka. They'll be here soon unless our forces can block them."

Just before eight, some civilians came up to the command post, carrying baskets of food. Breakfast consisted of rice and fermented soybean curd in banana leaf-packets — no feast but an indication of thorough preparation. As I ate, I could not but reflect again on the fact that the defenders had been taken totally by surprise. Of their tenacity, displayed under intense fire even as we watched, there was no question. Their Achilles Heel was poor intelligence, a direct reflection of the lack of co-operation they could expect from the local population in insurgent areas. Even the communists, who unlike the KIA or SSA made no appeal to nationalist sentiment, enjoyed a closer relationship with the local people than the government's army.

Another message came in. "Hill Two's been overrun!"

I glanced at my watch: It was eight o'clock exactly. There was more wild cheering in the command post — until the radio operator spoke again and the smiles abruptly vanished.

"Planes are on their way from Meiktila Air Base. Fighter-bombers."

I looked at Kyaw Nyunt, who passed my unspoken query on to Kyi Myint. The reply was curt:

"If they bomb, you'll have to move. We can't risk it. But don't worry. We've got seven anti-aircraft guns on these hills."

The bombardment continued. Once having adjusted their range the 120 mm mortars and 75 mm recoilless rifles were pouring in direct

hits on government bunkers and breastworks. Casualties on the summits had to be heavy. Quite aside from communist superiority in firepower, the ratio in manpower was, in line with classic Maoist military doctrine, nearly ten to one in the attackers' favour.

But still there was no sign of any interest in surrender. Even though I was observing the attack from the communist side, it was impossible not to be impressed by the sheer staying power of the defenders. In Kesan Chanlam, where I had been in the less comfortable position of being attacked, the tactical skill and tenacity of the army had been apparent. Despite the heavy casualties they had suffered during the first day's fighting, the pattern had been the same: no surrender — dig in and hold out.

CASUALTIES on the CPB's side were harder to estimate. But scanning the battlefield through the field-glasses, I suddenly focused in on a long line of militiamen trudging up towards Hill One carrying bamboo stretchers. It was now time to begin reckoning the cost of victory in terms of blood, mutilation and death.

At 10.30 am Hill Three fell to the CPB. Now only the headquarters hill behind the actual Hsi-Hsinwan range remained. Kyaw Nyunt looked at me.

"The survivors are regrouping there. Our units are reporting the enemy is dragging his dead and wounded along."

Almost simultaneously, the sound of gunfire came from some point well beyond Hsi-Hsinwan. Kyaw Nyunt appeared concerned.

"Must be the reinforcements from Mong Yu."

The delay with the heavy mortars early in the morning was not the only sign of lack of co-ordination between the CPB's various units in the field. The command post had also lost contact with several of the columns which had been deployed to block the reinforcements from

Namhpakka and Mong Yu. Evidently, some of these had already reached the western and northern foothills of Hsi-Hsinwan.

All efforts were now concentrated on bombarding the headquarters hill. One 120 mm mortar round after another burst on target. But even though the position was being blown to pieces around them, the defenders were not withdrawing. I asked Kyaw Nyunt what the reason was for the refusal to give up; the place had to be occupied by as many dead and wounded as able-bodied troops.

"Their base command has radioed with orders not to surrender. They'll come and help, they say. With infantry, artillery and air support."

The sound of explosions and gunfire continued to echo across the mountain — and more stretcher-bearers plodded to retrieve the casualties. Kyi Myint tried to conceal his concern with jovial gestures and loud laughs. His earlier enthusiasm every time a hill had been captured had not been feigned. But I began to suspect that he was now far less sure of the final outcome. Finally, he turned to me:

"You'd better leave. If there are airstrikes, it's going to be dangerous."

I had no reason to protest. Most of the initial fighting was over and I had sufficient photographs and tape-recordings. Kyaw Nyunt and I began walking downhill, back to the base camp where we had spent the night. We found it crowded with soldiers, officers, and medics treating the wounded. Nearly all the CPB's troops were dark Wa tribesmen. Most of them were young, some hardly in their teens, and they giggled like schoolboys as I passed. The outcome of battle was of far less concern to them than the novelty of a tall, white foreigner in a bush hat armed with a camera.

I looked over at some corpses laid out on the ground near a clump of trees. Some of the dead could hardly have been 17 or 18. A faint

breeze stirred the green cloth of their baggy, Chinese army trousers, seeming only to emphasise how motionless the bodies lay. Many had been hit by bullets squarely on their foreheads, where open red wounds gaped. The Burmese infantryman again emerged as a lethal shot.

I reflected sadly on my own youth and the chances I had had in life which had been denied these hilltribe lads. I doubted whether any of them had been to school or really knew, much less cared, anything about the ideology for which they had sacrificed their lives. It was as if Kyaw Nyunt could read my thoughts.

"War is cruel."

We walked together in silence down the mountain to Mong Paw. Most civilians had taken to the bush when they had heard news of imminent airstrikes, and the village was all but deserted. But a few intrepid **khao soi** vendors were still behind their stalls in the market and we sat down and ordered a bowl each — along with a small bottle of rice liquor. We both needed a stiff drink.

"All the people are looking at you," Kyaw Nyunt grinned as he began to relax. "They wouldn't believe me if I told them you're a journalist."

"So that do they think I am?"

"Well, they most probably think you're a Soviet adviser. They know the relations between the CPB and China aren't that good anymore. So they're probably betting you're a Soviet adviser who's come via Laos to direct this battle. Wait until the rumour spreads!" We both laughed.

Throughout the meal, the sound of artillery echoed and rolled off Hsi-Hsinwan. It did not die out until the late afternoon when we learnt the headquarters hill had finally been overrun.

"It's over now," Kyaw Nyunt said as we strolled back along the dusty village road towards the camp in the old mission compound. I was not so sure. Reinforcements were undoubtedly on their way, and although the planes had failed to put

in an appearance, the report indicating they had taken off would not have been sent without reason. I picked up a bottle of Chinese whisky from a shop on the way and we sat and shared it that night to a backdrop of renewed but sporadic gunfire in the distance. We were too tired even to bother finding out who was firing at whom or where.

We had breakfast the following morning together with Kyi Myint, Ohn Kyi and some other officers who had just returned from the front.

"Only 43 enemies escaped the bombardment of our People's Army. And eleven of them were badly wounded. So we annihilated more than 50 reactionary mercenaries," Ohn Kyi announced, shoveling rice into his mouth.

"What about your own casualties?" I asked. A hasty exchange of glances.

"Twelve comrades made the ultimate sacrifice," said Ohn Kyi with a curt nod, as if to close the matter.

There was no way I could cross-check these claims, but I felt certain casualties had been high on both sides. I asked about the reinforcements from Mong Yu, Namhpakka and Kutkai. Kyi Myint and Ohn Kyi again exchanged glances.

"Two battalions of enemy troops are already close to the headquarters hill and more are on their way."

"And the planes?"

"Well, they didn't come yesterday. Maybe today or tomorrow. The enemy's going to launch a counter offensive."

As a precautionary measure, I was shown after breakfast to an air raid shelter on the hillside just below the camp. It consisted of a large cave carved out of the damp clay, but appeared solid enough. Having deposited my notebooks and film inside, I asked Kyi Myint whether I could go and visit the captured positions on Hsi-Hsinwan. He agreed.

"But only to Hill Two. Beyond that, we can't guarantee your security. The enemy forces are closing in."

I put Hseng NOUNG's cameras in my knapsack and set off for Hsi-Hsinwan together with Kyaw Nyunt and an escort of three Wa soldiers. An old Chinese truck was still plying between Mong Paw market and Panghsai. Kyaw Nyunt and I climbed into its cabin; the back was crammed with villagers. With dramatic gestures and by mimicking the sounds of rockets, they were refigiting the battle they had heard on the previous day.

A few kilometres outside Mong Paw, we spotted a group of CPB soldiers escorting a wounded man. He appeared almost mummy-like, his head and right hand swathed in bandages, and was staggering along the road, supporting himself with a staff.

"A wounded Burmese soldier!" exclaimed Kyaw Nyunt.

There had been talk of one government soldier having been left behind by the forces that had retreated from the headquarters hill. The CPB had brought him back to their field hospital at the base camp, where they had patched him up. Part of the communists' philosophy in war, another basic Maoist precept, was never to kill prisoners, and to treat enemy wounded as they would their own casualties. The only gratuitous hardship inflicted on them would be political lectures given by rabid ideologues like Ohn Kyi.

I asked if I could interview the wounded soldier. The answer was no.

"He might be sent back soon. But if you want pictures, I can get out and talk to him while you take photos through the lorry window."

Kyaw Nyunt got out, and with a notebook in hand, began to pretend to interrogate him.

"What's your name?"

"Sergeant San Aung."

"Number?"

"289346."

I could see the man's eyes were focused on my camera rather than his interrogator. He looked as if he had seen a ghost. Exactly what he would report when eventually he

was released and sent back was anyone's guess. But I was disappointed at not being able to interview him. I would at least have liked to tell him I had been impressed by the fighting spirit of his unit.

We got down from the truck just below Hsi-Hsinwan and continued uphill on foot. The base camp was heaped with captured weapons: the standard G-2 and G-3 rifle of the Burma army, light artillery in the form of 75 mm recoilless rifles, a 90mm US-made rocket launcher, heaps of mortar bombs, grenades, Claymore mines and rifle magazines. I snapped off a few frames before walking on, up to Hill One where young CPB soldiers were basking in the sun after the previous day's fighting. The atmosphere was quiet but still tense, the calm after the fury of the storm.

More troops joined us and we followed a winding trail which had been cleared by the victors through the tall elephant grass. The mountainside was covered in mine-fields and I was told to stick strictly to the newly made path. We struggled along in the midday heat for nearly an hour until we reached Hill Two. The position was one of the best fortified I had ever seen, consisting of a complex of bunkers covered with logs and earth. Tunnels, barbed wire entanglements and trenches hedged with sharpened bamboo stakes encircled the hilltop. In the camp, blood-stained blankets littered the bamboo beds inside the bunkers. Outside was a small Buddhist altar, also made from bamboo, adorned with still fresh flowers and incense sticks. A few dozen Wa lads with automatic rifles lay around. There was no sign of action in the vicinity, but Kyaw Nyunt urged me to hurry up with my photography: government forces were advancing towards the northern foothills.

We left the ridge in the afternoon and walked back to the camp near Mong Paw. Kyi Myint was studying captured documents when we arrived. My eyes fell on one of the maps which lay on the table. It

showed Hsi-Hsinwan, the Burma army positions there, and, startlingly, arrows pointing downhill towards Nam Tao, Mong Paw and Panghsai.

"Did they plant to capture this area?" I asked.

My query was gently brushed aside. But I realised immediately that the timing of the attack on Hsi-Hsinwan had been no accident: it had been a question of who was going to strike first. I wondered whether the original government plan had been abandoned, or if the Army would now be more determined than ever to implement it. China's position was, of course, crucial to the final outcome of the battle. Most of the ammunition I had seen being trucked up to Hsi-Hsinwan had been conspicuously new; there seemed to be no doubt the Chinese, at least for the time being and for obvious commercial reasons, supported the CPB's efforts to secure the trade route to Panghsai.

ON the table was also a bundle of letters written to relatives and friends back in the soldiers' hometowns and found in the bunkers on Hsi-Hsinwan. The company positioned on the mountain would soon have been rotated out, another consideration in deciding when to launch the attack; the communists calculated that the knowledge they would soon be going home would render the garrison less vigilant than a newly arrived unit.

I asked Kyaw Nyunt to translate some of the letters. They made depressing reading. One was written to a young soldier by his girlfriend in Kalaw, a garrison town in southern Shan State where his unit was based. "When you come back this time, we must get married," wrote the girl. "My family is preparing for our wedding." Whether this soldier had been among the survivors of the battle was impossible to say, but as the girl's love letter had been left behind, I rather suspected he had been one of the casualties. Her reaction

on learning her sweetheart had been blown to pieces by 120mm mortars while defending a barren mountain in a remote patch of borderland I preferred not to dwell on. Officially, he would be a hero who had died defending the unity of his country. But he would go nameless and numberless, casualty figures being invariably understated so as not to alarm the public.

The sound of heavy weapons fire woke us up at five the next morning. The counter-offensive had begun. And this time, aircraft were definitely on their way: four fighter-bombers from Meiktila Air Base. Kyi Myint was already directing troop movements over a walkie-talkie, and had ordered a jeep to pick up Kyaw Nyunt and me.

"You're leaving for Mong Ko today. The fighting's going to be heavy."

He looked determined but less confident than the day before. Only Ohn Kyi was wearing his permanent grin and holding forth on the politics of the carnage.

"They can never defeat us as long as we have the support of the masses. This is a people's war," he intoned. "Socialism and communism will emerge victorious at last. That's the law of history. Nothing can reverse it."

For the time being, however, my best course of action was to move on to Mong Ko, the CPB's regional headquarters close to the Chinese border, 38 kms to the northeast of Mong Paw. The jeep arrived shortly afterwards and the driver, a sturdy Kachin in a brown cardigan, drove at a high speed along the Mong Paw valley trailing a cloud of dust behind us. The road led uphill as we left the valley. It had rained during the night and the surface was slippery. The jeep skidded sideways on the slope, the engine snarling. In the rush to leave, the driver had forgotten to bring chains.

"Let's get out and push," said Kyaw Nyunt.

We jumped out and began shoving the jeep uphill. But again

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the vehicle bogged, the engine shrieking and the tyres spinning helplessly.

"Planes!" I shouted.

Kyaw Nyung straightened and listened. The roar of aero-engines was easily audible across the hills, followed by the reverberating boom of explosions. We set to the jeep again, spurred by the realisation that the aircraft were only a few minutes flying time away. Straining and gasping, we manhandled the vehicle step by step up towards the crest. To avoid slipping back into the mud, I wedged a rock under my right foot and pushed the jeep with my shoulder, using my full strength. The planes were now definitely too close for comfort. Kyaw Nyunt, too, was growing nervous. If they flew over us and spotted the jeep, not a mode of transport used by the average villager, they would very probably shoot it up. We struggled and groaned with sweat pouring down our faces, and we were soon covered with mud. Suddenly, the pressure on our shoulders eased. The road levelled out after a sharp bend on the last uphill stretch. We were out of the mud, Kyaw Nyunt and I jumped in and the jeep sped off, on towards Mong Ko.

There were no other vehicles on the narrow dirt road through the forest, apart from two trucks laden with munition boxes which passed us driving in the opposite direction. Shortly after meeting them, we reached a ridge from which we could see Hsi-Hsinwan. I looked back. Dirty pillars of brown smoke were wreathing up from the heights.

"Stop!" I shouted above the noise of the jeep's engine. "Hsi-Hsinwan's being hit!"

We climbed out of the jeep to get a clearer view. The four bald humps of Hsi-Hsinwan rose from the forests on the horizon. From the distance came the growl of aero-engines punctuated by the rumble of exploding bombs. Fresh clouds of white and brown smoke billowed over the mountain. I thought of the positions we had visited on the pre-



vious day — and of the young Wa boys now defending them. It was intimidating enough from this safe distance; to sit huddled in the trenches and bunkers with the bombs falling all around would have been terrifying. With its handful of obsolete, propeller-driven PC-6s and PC-7s, the Burma Air Force ranked as the least impressive in Asia. But that would be no consolation to those beneath the bombs it did manage to deliver.

We climbed back into the jeep and drove on in sombre mood. Some three hours later, the Mong Ko valley hove into view. It was considerably larger than the Mong Paw valley, and in broad fields ripening paddy rippled in the wind. The village itself was located in the middle of the valley floor and consisted of more than 100 houses, surrounded by bamboo groves. A stream running down the middle of the valley formed the international frontier between China and Burma. On the other side, a cluster of concrete buildings made up the Chinese village of Man Hai.

We drove through the village, past the market and on to the CPB's Northern Bureau headquarters a few kilometres to the east. An armed sentry in communist uniform guarded the entrance to the camp. Two twin-barrelled anti-aircraft machine-guns were positioned in a nearby field. The jeep pulled up outside a solid brick building where three party officials were awaiting our arrival. We shook hands and the most senior of the three was introduced to me. This was Kyaw Sein, a tall, slim veteran of the communist struggle. The other two were younger intellectuals in their mid-thirties; the one a short, swarthy Burman from Mandalay, the other a thin frail-looking Shan from Myitkyina in Kachin State. We sat down inside and were served coffee and biscuits. A red banner adorned with a yellow hammer and sickle hung on the wall.

"You'll have to stay here for a few days and then continue your journey to Panghsang on foot. The motor road ends here," Kyaw Sein said through Kyaw Nyunt. The old man spoke no English but smiled

and nodded after each sentence was translated. I asked about Hsi-Hsinwan but there was no news. I could not help worrying about Hseng Nong and Hseng Tai. Presumably, they were still at the KIA's 4th Brigade headquarters at Man Pi. But if the entire area between the Mong Paw valley and the Chinese border had now become a battlefield, it would be difficult for them to reach Panghsai and the bus from Wanting on the Chinese side of the border.

The night before my departure, a dinner party was arranged after which a film was shown for my benefit. It was a 16mm propaganda documentary made in 1978 by a Chinese film crew that had travelled all over the CPB-controlled zone. Its Burmese title translated as the 'Inextinguishable Flame', and the production was in the inimitable style of China's Cultural Revolution — heroic, world-conquering and highly stylised. As the film progressed, however, it became clear that its Chinese makers had had some difficulty adjusting to the somewhat different conditions of northern Burma. They had evidently been schooled to produce footage that relied heavily on mass scenes — throngs ten thousands-strong outside the Gate of the Heavenly Peace, workers' rallies on a Shanghai wharf, waves of Liberation Army troops sweeping to victory. Attempts to bring off similar effects in the sparsely populated mountain ranges of Shan State bordered on the ludicrous.

One memorable sequence purported to show the masses welcoming party chairman Thakin Ba Thein Tin to a CPB base camp. The scene was set with footage of a group of soldiers diligently polishing their weapons, sewing uniforms and tapping out Morse messages over wireless sets. Enter a messenger among the crowd calling out with an excitement impossible to contain that the Chairman had at last arrived. Joy! Ardour! Apparently from numerous bamboo huts, surged forth a steady stream of hundreds more soldiers,

waving clenched fists and cheering lustily. A critical eye, however, might have detected that in fact the revolutionary hundreds issued from what were in fact the same four or five small huts shot many times and from many different angles. Having emerged into the radiant sunshine of the chairman's presence, the throng of troops began to chant in spontaneous unison:

"Long live the Communist Party of Burma!"

"Long live Chairman Thakin Ba Thein Tin!"

"Long live Marxism-Leninism Mao Zedong Thought!"

Virtually every scene was on this pseudo-epic scale. It was not enough to show ten women returning from the fields carrying the rice harvest: there had to be 200 or 300 of them. Three or four horses would not suffice; a herd of 50 or 60 was required. Indeed, it must have been an exhausting exercise in logistics to gather this enormous cast of extras from across the barren hills of the 'liberated' area.

The acting tended to the melodrama of the silent screen. One sequence showed a mass meeting in a Wa village held to denounce a feudal lord. The actor who portrayed him had good, stolid peasant looks and stood in a village square, unmoving, with his head sunk on his chest in unspeakable shame. Scores of villagers, mostly women, jostled for their turn to scream abuse with stabbing gestures of the forefinger.

But my own favourite was a scene portraying the arrival of urban intellectuals who had made their way to the party's base area to join the revolution. It opened with a flotilla of canoes being paddled up a river through dense jungle. They were crammed with earnest-looking young men, the majority bespectacled, and all elegantly attired in traditional Burmese dress — longyi and jackets with high-buttoned necks. As they disembarked from the canoes, they gathered up their luggage: briefcases, suitcases and — somewhat incongruously for those

shaking off the terrors of Imperialism — Pan Am flightbags. One of the intellectuals then shouted and pointed up the hillside. Cut to an immaculately uniformed, apple-cheeked young communist soldier in heroic pose, rifle braced across his chest. Like Jack-in-the-Boxes, dozens more CPB troops popped up on screen behind him.

Cut back to the intellectuals, who by now were racing up the hillside, faces suffused with luminous joy, right hands extended stiffly in front of them.

Cut back to the Vanguard of the Revolution, who by this time were streaming down the hillside, ditto.

The two sides collided in a tangled melee of extravagant embraces, hand-shaking and back-slapping. Traditional Burmese costumes began flying through the air and in seconds the camera discovered the new volunteers in brand-new uniforms, belts shining, trousers crisply creased. All were tenderly cradling the new weapons with which they had just been issued. Then followed a traditional Burmese dance to the music of gongs and drums and with slowly swaying bodies and graceful sinuous gestures of the arms and hands as the newly arrived intellectuals-turned-soldiers mingled in revolutionary union with their new-found comrades-in-arms. The climax of the scene was a procession of the volunteers, bearing a huge portrait of Chairman Thakin Ba Thein Tin at the head of the crowd and marching through a deserted landscape with enthusiastic shouts of praise for the party. Suddenly, I saw a figure I thought I recognised — younger and well-scrubbed, but unmistakably Kyaw Nyunt. I turned and nudged him:

"Isn't that you? Third from the left?"

He winced; then hissed back: "They made me do it."

When the lights came on he was ill at ease and obviously disinclined to discuss the extravaganza we had just witnessed. I decided it might be tactful if I had an early night. □



The FCCT's Christmas party attracted a strong turnout of wide-eyed celebrants this past quarter. Santa presided over the event after his dramatic entrance over the Dusit Thani roof, assisted by Club staff and a good fairy or two.



Loy Krathong provided members with another occasion for frolick, with some display of appropriate finery.

CONGRATULATIONS to the new Committee members elected at the Club's Annual General meeting held on 25 January.

Dominic Faulder (Bureau Bangkok) returns for a second term as Club president, with two new faces to back him up: **Boris Chekhonin** of Tass News Agency at First Vice President and **Erskine McCullough** of Agence France-Presse at Second Vice President.

Also making their first appearance on the Committee are Corresponding Secretary **Tan Lian Choo** (Straits Times of Singapore), Correspondent Director of Publicity **Michael Shari** (Agence France-Presse) and **Mary K Magistad** (Boston Globe et al). Back as Correspondent Director of Programmes is **Suchart Supaniran** (Publishers Representatives Ltd).

Karen Shur Narula (Freelance

FCCT 1991 EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

Journalist) remains as Recording Secretary, together with **Peter Coeshott** (Thomas, Spencer and Associates Ltd) as Treasurer.

The new Associate Director of Publicity is **John Leicester** (Post Publishing Co) and the new Associate Director of Programmes is **Ruth Adams** (US Peace Corps), while **Yvan Van Outrive** (Cheney Tan & Van

Outrive) continues for another year as Associate Director of Membership and **Yuli Ismartono** (Tempo) retains her position as Immediate Past President.

Warmest thanks to those Committee members who managed their escape from the weekly meetings and related obligations of the last year. □

*Moment's before
moving to Japan,
club member
Gwen Robinson
shared some of her
insights on Vietnam*



Hack's Guide to Vietnam

GETTING THERE

If you have never been to Vietnam, make contact with the Vietnamese embassy (in Bangkok, the information attache, Mr Nguyen Quang Dy handles endless queries from journalists with seemingly endless patience). You will need to write a letter stating your publication/organization, proposed schedule and dates of your planned visit to Vietnam and, probably, a brief description of the articles/projects you plan to do. Obviously, for news journalists, this cannot be comprehensive, but it's a good idea to list a few main story ideas. You also need to list interview requests. Again, this is flexible and can be added to once you're there, but some of the main appointments you would like should be listed in advance. It is standard practice to request some senior figures, but government ministers, party leaders and military chiefs almost never come through.

Another way to get to Vietnam, although it is unofficial, is transiting en route to Cambodia. This gives a maximum of three-or-so days each way, but is not satisfactory if you want to do official interviews with a guide/interpreter.

Once you have permission, book your flight and plan in more detail what you want to do while there. Short provincial trips are also very flexible once you're arrived, and can be arranged through the Press Centre. But if you know exactly where you want to go, list this in your letter. In Bangkok, the embassy is at: 83 Wireless Rd., Telephone for Mr Dy: 2515835; consular: 2517201 or 2; Fax: 2517201.

GUIDES

Essentially, they are supposed to be your eyes and ears. This is more the case in Hanoi than in HCM City. But guides can make or break a visit to Vietnam, particularly on long trips, depending on their level of enthusiasm and competence. They are definitely not servants and don't take kindly to being treated as such. On the other hand, you are doing a job and so are they — although it should be remembered that requests you may have to translate Vietnamese newspaper articles or do some after-hours unofficial interpreting are extra to their official obligations. Usually, a courteous attitude should achieve results. Some journalists like to give "thank you" tips at the end to their

guide and driver. This is entirely up to you, as is the amount you think you should give. Considerations have been known to range from \$20 up to excessively generous amounts. Use your discretion.

The talent at the Foreign Ministry press centre ranges from miraculous to uninterested. Linguistic abilities also vary widely. The best advice for first-time visitors is to work with your assigned guide and if all goes well, request the same person again via telex to the Press Centre in Hanoi (for both Hanoi and HCM City) well before your next visit. If you think you could have done better, try your luck the next time around. If you are seriously dissatisfied during your first visit, try talking to the guide and, if all else fails, request a change from the Press Centre.

ARRIVAL, TRANSPORT, AND ACCOMMODATION

The press centre generally takes care of arrangements. But just in case something goes wrong (which is not unheard of), it's best to have a few telephone numbers and addresses of hotels and important contacts such as the press centre.

Bargain a car (anything from \$20 to \$40 for a ride into Hanoi City from the airport; about \$15 from the airport to HCM City), give the name of a hotel, and use the telephone when you get there. Language is more of an obstacle in Hanoi, where little English is spoken, although you may have better luck with

VIETNAM, like its northern neighbour China, has the dubious privilege of being among the last remaining communist states in the world.

While clinging tenaciously to an unfashionable political system, Vietnam is also trying to modernize economically and attract foreign investment. Some warn this curious blend of communist politics and free market economics could ultimately lead to disaster.

But for the time being, the coun-

try's "open door" policy has generated new economic activity, including a grass-roots boom in small and medium-scale private enterprise. In the process, previously harsh restrictions on access for foreign visitors, especially tourists and business people, have eased significantly.

The foreign media has generally witnessed steady improvement in initially limited access from the mid-eighties onwards, but can now take advantage of new freedoms to travel

within Vietnam.

But the country's pervasive internal security apparatus remains pervasive, and permission is still required for any travel outside Hanoi and HCM City. Some areas remain largely off-limits to the media — for example, the central highlands which is home to many of Vietnam's ethnic minorities (Hanoi regards the region as politically sensitive, partly due to its history of resistance to the Communist forces).

At the same time, there are

French. Vietnamese is written in Roman script so when stuck, you can always try writing names down and showing them to drivers.

In Hanoi, your best bets for hotels include the Defence Ministry Guesthouse; the Friendship Hotel (one of the few new additions); the Hoa Binh Hotel; and the Thang Loi (location is not ideal). In HCM City, take your pick from a long list — price can be a major determinant, since at the top end (Saigon Floating Hotel, The Continental) rooms go for about \$85 to \$95 a night. Favourites with hacks include the Rex hotel; the Cuulong Majestic (which lost a couple of floors of its five storeys in a fire last year); and the Doc Lap (better known as the Caravel) — they have rooms ranging from about \$45 to \$65 a night. On the next step down are the Bong Sen; the Hung Nghi (Palace); and then the Saigon Concert Hotel and the Kim Do (these range from about \$20 to \$40 a night). Beyond these are a range of so-called "mini-hotels" and guesthouses, many of them private, where rooms can be had for as little as \$7 or so a night. You can find such places on a pedicab tour through the city, since they usually have large signs outside.

TELECOMMUNICATIONS

Communications links have improved dramatically in the past year, and are set to improve further over the coming year. In Hanoi, HCM City and major provincial cities in-

ternational calls can be made at the post office, and in some fax machines are also available. HCM City provides more fax, telex and telephone facilities since each of the six main hotels has a business centre. Unfortunately there is still no 24-hour fax and telex service in Vietnam, although international telephone calls can be made at any time from most hotels and the Saigon Floating Hotel in HCM City boasts IDD dialling. Prices for international telecommunications have come down marginally, but are still high — and there is no facility for collect calling. In Hanoi, international calls can be made from guesthouses and hotels, although fax and telex facilities are still limited. Also, service from major provincial cities such as Danang, Hue and Haiphong is surprisingly good on international calls although, again, fax facilities are limited. The great irony of Vietnam's moves to upgrade telecommunications is that while you may wait only five minutes to call overseas from Danang or HCM City, to call domestic long-distance between the two can take up to three hours and lines are generally unspeakably bad. The same goes for links between Hanoi and HCM City, although a new fibre optic cable link will improve matters within about one year.

MONEY

US dollars are still the main currency for transactions such as pay-

ing your press centre fees. However, the various State-run banks in Hanoi and HCM City will change a few other currencies, including yen. Credit cards have at last made an appearance in some areas (as of January, only in HCM City). Since mid-1990, exchange rates have been stabilized, unlike earlier days when blackmarket rates were many times above official rates, and a lot more establishments than before now accept Vietnamese dong.

AIR TRANSPORT

There are three international airports, Hanoi, HCM City, and Danang, but only Hanoi and HCM are used for international arrivals. New aviation agreements are emerging thick and fast between Vietnam and commercial airlines, although most commercial flights go into HCM City only. As of January, airlines flying to HCM City regularly included: Air France, Air Vietnam; Garuda; Lufthansa; MAS; PAL; THAI International. Direct air links have also just been established between Australia and Vietnam. JAL is among airlines expecting to commence direct flights to HCM this year.

There are a number of domestic destinations serviced by Air Vietnam, including Ban Me Thuot, Danang and Dien Bien Phu. These can be booked at Air Vietnam offices in major cities. □

many new opportunities to visit other areas of the country, and also to travel by road or rail from north to south — a trip well worth doing if you have at least four days and US\$400 or \$500 extra to spare. The mostly coastal route south through the old capital of Hue, the city of Danang, the resort area of Nha Trang, and inland to the mountain city of Dalat before reaching HCM City provides fascinating contrasts and some of the best scenery Vietnam has to offer.

If travel-time or budget is limited, try to make at least one short provincial trip for a first-hand look at the diversity of the country. From Hanoi, one-day return journeys can be made to places such as the northern border with China, or to the busy port of Haiphong. Down south, short excursions from HCM City include the fertile Mekong Delta area, and the western Cambodian border province of Tay Ninh, home of the eccentric Cao Dai sect.

For enterprising hacks, the Communist Party's push to modernize everything (seemingly with the exception of politics) from agriculture and industry to infrastructure and banking, provides a whole new range of topics to pursue in Vietnam reportage.

But for the nostalgic, there are still many reminders of the two themes which dominated the last two decades of press coverage of Vietnam — war and communism. To begin with are the bomb craters, scattered liberally over the neat patchwork of rice fields, clearly visible on approach by air to either Hanoi or HCM City.

Alongside revolutionary mottos and ubiquitous portraits of Ho Chi Minh, both cities boast numerous war museums and memorials, with elaborate displays of weapons, photographs and relics from battles with French, Chinese and American forces. Provincial towns in the north and south frequently feature buildings scarred or ruined from bombing and artillery fire. In virtually every



The author (right); Vietnam (above).



major population centre, war veterans can be found who date as far back as the Dien Bien Phu campaign against the French in 1953-4.

North and south may have shared experiences of war and 16 years under unified communist rule, but the sharply contrasting characters of the two areas, in particular the two main cities and their inhabitants, emerge as soon as the visitor is on the ground.

In the north, the hour-long drive into Hanoi city from Noi Bai airport wends through rice fields and rustic villages. From the outset, arrival in HCM City, formally Saigon, is frenetic and noisy, starting with the disco tunes being piped through loud speakers in the Than Son Nhat airport terminal, and the advertising billboards clustered outside.

In HCM City, credit cards (Visa and Mastercard) can be used at a

surprising number of outlets, whereas in Hanoi, "plastic money" was still unheard of by January. Nightlife rages in HCM City, with discos in many of the 10 or so major hotels, plus scores of other bars and restaurants dotted throughout the city.

The top end of the market boasts the "Downunder" disco at the Australian-Japanese owned Saigon Floating Hotel (drinks \$5, rooms \$95). The Floating Hotel also scooped the pool with the first (and as of New Year, the only) direct international dial telephone and fax system in Vietnam. Among the more recent additions in HCM City are several Japanese restaurants, an extremely elegant French restaurant — Le Mekong — a Korean establishment and an Indian restaurant. Cars are available from the major hotels, although in the inner city most destinations can be reached by a 10-

minute pedicab ride.

It is more difficult to get around in Hanoi, a spacious and elegant — albeit run-down — city mostly built by the French. Cars (with drivers) can be hired at the only major hotel in town, the Thang Loi, but for individual excursions, pedicabs are the most common form of transportation.

In its slow move to "jazz up", Hanoi gained its first modern nightclub/restaurant/shopping complex, the International Club, last year. The club, which is open to all who pay the modest entrance fee of about 6,000 dong (less than \$1) now boasts a French restaurant and Japanese-style karaoke bar — but still observes a strict closing time of midnight.

On arrival, visitors to Hanoi are more or less dependent on a guide or escort to meet them with a car for the long haul into the city, whereas in HCM City the problem is beating off all the hopefuls who descend on visitors offering cars for hire.

Smuggling and trade in black-market goods is much more of a problem in the south than the north, so customs formalities can be tedious. One regrettably identical feature in both airports is a misplaced zeal for cooking all types of baggage in antiquated X-ray machines. Warning: do not be deceived by the "Filmsafe" signs on the machines — there are many irate photographers and journalists, this correspondent for one, who have regretted it. Smile sweetly and remove your films and any computer equipment such as discs and lap-top computers.

For a balanced overview of Vietnam, it is advisable to visit both cities initially. Politically, Hanoi is still very much the nerve-centre of a communist state, and is the place for formal interviews with central government officials and party cadre, some academics, and "party-approved" analysts, such as editors of state-run newspapers. Unless you have an enthusiastic guide, or a few lucky breaks, your independent sources of analysis and information

are generally confined to the expatriate community — aid organizations, diplomats and the few foreign correspondents who are not only permitted to reside in Hanoi, but who also have the time and inclination to talk about it.

Make a point of asking your guide for a daily run-down of the main stories appearing in the two major official Party newspapers — Nhan Dan (People's Daily) and Quan Doi Nhan Dan (the military newspaper).

HCM City, with its fast-moving, laissez faire character, provides more opportunities to speak with a range of officials and independent Vietnamese, from "the man in the street", to private entrepreneurs, writers and artists. Major newspapers such as Saigon Dai Phong and Tuoi Tre are much bolder than the northern-based newspapers, and are sometimes good sources for stories.

The city also has much more of an "after-hours" life, providing plenty of bars, shops, restaurants and places to wander. English is more widely spoken due to years of American domination.

As for the provinces: for travel journalists, feature writers or anyone wanting a more comprehensive perspective, trips through rural areas and smaller cities such as Hue and Danang are highly recommended.

In each major provincial city the local People's Committee is usually your main point of contact, unless you are visiting private individuals or have arranged something directly from Hanoi. The degree of cooperation you receive from the provincial authorities can vary significantly. So can standards of food and accommodation, since beyond the main cities lodgings are usually limited to dilapidated state-owned guest houses.

In all places, official interviews and travel arrangements are generally the responsibility of your Vietnamese interpreter/guide. Such guides are assigned to all foreign journalists by the Hanoi-based Foreign Ministry Press Centre. Costs of

this service can vary from about \$20 per day upwards, depending on how often you require a car and driver, and how much travel you do.

In Hanoi, the home seat of the communist party, journalists are usually met by their assigned guide and conducted to a hotel in town. Since the closure in 1989 of the popular old French-built Than Nhat (Metropole) Hotel for renovation, hacks have generally been herded into state-run guest houses. The first choice is usually the guest house run by the Defence Ministry, which provides clean, air-conditioned and comfortable rooms for about \$30 a night upwards. The establishment is indeed adjacent to a gracious French-built Defence Ministry building, but don't expect any chance meetings with any of the top brass — the guest-house is purely a foreign exchange-earning venture!

While VIPs and official visitors are lodged in the State guest-house or one of several other government guest houses, business people generally stay at the only major hotel in town, the Thang Loi. This Cuban-built establishment is definitely a cut above all other accommodation in Hanoi, but has the disadvantage the city and almost double the price of guest houses.

The city is clearly suffering from an accommodation shortage, as seen in a few recent visits when with several large official delegations in town, journalists were ferreting out rooms-to-share in obscure guest houses.

Restaurants, however, have boomed in the past year and at last count there were more than 20 reasonable places to eat. Ask the local expat community and at your guest-house, or simply tell a cyclo-driver the name of a place. Favourites include The Piano Bar, one of the most long-running and successful restaurants with the foreign community in Hanoi; the Rose; and a number of places which are known only by their street numbers, such as the "202 restaurant". □

Reminiscing

Tass News Agency bureau chief Boris Chekhonin thinks back on his five years in Thailand

THOUGH I've worked twenty years as a foreign correspondent, had 10 books published and 25 film scripts produced it would be presumptuous to suggest that I have anything to teach club members.

We Russians have a saying, that you can't give lectures to scientists. But I would nevertheless like to take this opportunity to reminisce a bit on my posting in Thailand.

I'm packing my bags after five years in Bangkok, in a few months to return to Moscow in the midst of perestroika, which is so popular here and in the West. A proper time, I think, to thank my colleagues in the local and foreign press for the assistance they have provided during this period.

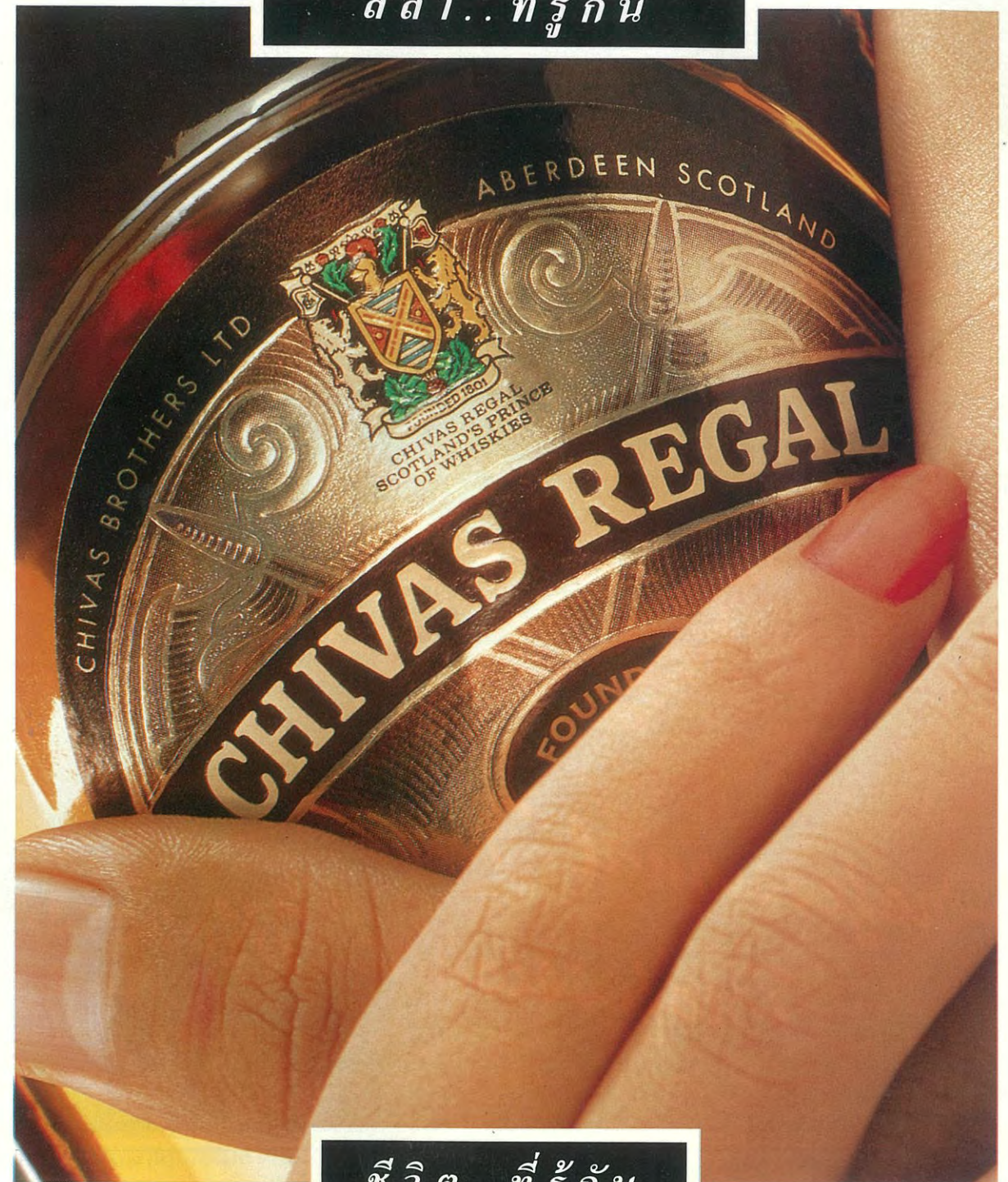
I must also say warm words to the current and former leadership of the FCCT, to Eric Brighton, Ms Vilai and to those fine guardians of our bar — where I have consumed no less than two barrels of beer and no fewer than 10 kilos of nuts.

Most important, perhaps, I thank my destiny for sending me to exotic Thailand.

Some time ago, back in Moscow, my wife decided to go to a famous fortuneteller. I couldn't talk her out of it. When a husband reaches the age of 58, every wife wants to know what lies in store for her. In the event, she returned to our home very happy. "In a year," she said, "We shall have a very interesting as-



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signment in some foreign country."

This caused me to smile. Perestroika was in full swing, and many people were being pensioned off before reaching full retirement age. The revolution needed new hands. But, suddenly, the prophecy came true.

In April 1986 we found ourselves settled in Thailand, though I must admit that I felt uncomfortable that first year. Put yourself in my place. Two weeks after our arrival the Thai press ran a short article which said that after the expulsion of the previous Tass correspondent for national security reasons, a new man of the same sort had replaced him.

At first I tried to laugh. I knew very well that my predecessor did not belong to this dangerous category of correspondents. But a month later a series of articles appeared in the Thai press, all alleging that the Soviet Union — through my activities — was interfering in Thai affairs during the course of the parliamentary election campaign then underway.

Six months after that a brochure appeared in which I was depicted as the chief of a big Soviet subversive fund worth 40 million baht. It's aim, the brochure assured its readers, was to provide financial assistance to the underground Communist Party of Thailand.

I was shocked and angry. Topping this off was the criticism of my wife. "I did not know that you are such a miser," she told me. "I learn you control 40 million baht. Why don't you give at least one million to your family?"

We eventually compromised on 3000 baht, which she immediately spent at Central department store.

A lot has happened since then, and I hope I have been able during this time to open Thailand a bit for Soviet readers. Together with these readers I have been discovering this friendly nation and learning of its rapid progress and economic development.

At the same time I was lucky enough to meet and write about several leaders of the Thai state. For the first time in 73 years of Soviet power, for instance, I was able to write a piece on His Majesty the King for the political weekly Echo of the Planet.

Iszvestia, the government newspaper with a daily circulation of 11 million, published my interviews with Siddhi Savetsila, Prem Tinsulanond and Chatichai Choonhavan. Other newspapers, political weeklies and even a geographic magazine asked for commentaries and feature articles. The Soviet people wanted to know the truth about Thailand.

It is no secret that Soviet journalists, myself included, previously tried to paint a one-sided picture of the situation in Thailand. But Soviet journalism's new approach toward the Thai reality generated positive reactions from Thai officials and Thai organisations, and for the first time the Thai Foreign Ministry and the Public Relations Department were saying nice things about our coverage.

Please understand me correctly. I speak about this not because I look to praise myself. Rather, I hope to provide my foreign journalist colleagues some idea of the kind of work we Soviet journalists — even recently proclaimed to be KGB agents — are doing here now. But let us follow that Russian proverb that states that brevity is the sister of talent.

The governments of Prem Tinsulanond and Chatichai Choonhavan each helped ease the Cold War, and in this a major role was played by contacts at the highest levels — in particular the visits to the Soviet Union by Prem Tinsulanond and Siddhi Savetsila. At the same time, there was a big reaction in my country to the first official visit by a Soviet prime minister to Thailand. Trade, sport, cultural and social relations between our two countries are also on the move, helped by the efforts

of the Thai Foreign Ministry and the Soviet Embassy.

There is a role to be played by Thai and Soviet journalists in the bettering of relations between our two countries. For instance, the Thai news agency has invited the director-general of Tass to visit Bangkok, while films about Thailand are now shown on Soviet television.

Not everyone likes this process. Some prefer to retain the stereotypes, and the approval of Soviet visa applications remains difficult. Some try to apply other brakes.

One Thai newspaper recently published an article stating that I have taken on a new position. No longer simply a KGB agent, no longer simply head of the underground subversive fund, I am now identified as an agent of Soviet military intelligence.

An interesting story, but not a true one. More's the pity, actually, as I would then be eligible for a better pension on my approaching retirement.

I hope my successor's work here will prove easier. Developments are proceeding very fast. As for me, I speak not only for friendship with Thailand but for friendship with the United States as well, which can teach a great deal to the Soviet people.

I would like to see friendship improve as well with Japan, this fast-developing economic giant where I spent five of the best years of my life, and where my daughter Natasha was born.

On leaving Thailand I would express the hope that, in time, perestroika will finally prove victorious — in the Soviet Union, and in the FCCT as well. This isn't a wish to see empty shelves behind the bar. But, rather, in the sense that it would be refreshing to see a Soviet journalist elected to the board.

This is dictated not only by the atmosphere of our time. I am certain that such a development would add a new dimension and a new vigour to the FCCT and its work. □

CLUB NEWS

THE end of the year saw the departure of **Gwen Robinson**, one of Bangkok's most energetic and omni-present correspondents who introduced the concept of commuting to Indochina on a near weekly basis to ferret out the inner thoughts of the secretive politburos in Vietnam and Cambodia. With a contact book longer than the entire Bangkok telephone directory and a workday that bent the theory of relativity to extend each day to at least 36 hours, Gwen was apparently in training for the relatively sedate pace of life in Japan, where she will take up a job early in the New Year. Japan says whew!

However old correspondents never die, they just fade in and out of the picture. **Michael Adler**, AFP's secret weapon, who left Bangkok earlier this year for a post in Paris, was picked up on the FCCT radar screen closing in on human rights advocate **Khun Sa**, whom he hoped to interview for a glossy US publication and apparently unrelated to the voice of verite in Paris.

Also leaving Bangkok is **Denise Young** of Reuters, who is going back to where she started — Hong Kong — to keep an eye on what one billion Chinese intend to do with the lump of rock in the years leading up to 1997.

John Basko's factional video of Khmer Rouge love in the minefields, which was shown at the Club earlier this year, has been screened at a video festival in France, and John is hoping to drum up some cash to reshoot the story as a full length technicolor stereo film — War and Pieces in Cambodia?

Erskine McCullough, the new taste of Ireland at the voice of verite, is establishing an FCCT golf society — Jack Nicklaus has been slow to confirm that he will act as Club President, but meanwhile Erskine is practicing his putting in the hope of beating General Chavalit at a mili-

DIARY

tary invitation tournament.

In his spare time, Erskine has been pursuing the truth for the voice of verite, and undertook a gruelling trip to the Burmese border with H E Presidentissimo **Dominic Faulder**, an old hand at such voyages.

The two intrepid reporters were astonished to discover that Three Pagodas Pass has mysteriously disappeared from the place where H E had confidently driven to, but were nonetheless impressed by the scenery and wildlife of an apparently tranquil border location.

Bangkok's petrol supply has turned out to be laced with testosterone, as Suzuki jeeps have been observed mating in the Dusit Thani's car park. It is not clear who started the automobile procreation club, but in addition to H E Presidentissimo's four wheeled wonder, **Yuli Ismartono**, Erskine and Rodney Tasker have all been observed nurturing Suzuki specials. Unfortunately the steering lock is not tight enough to negotiate the spiral ramp leading out of the carpark — more house training required.

VOA's **David Dyar** was married this past quarter, and in a reception in the Clubhouse the bride's guests far outclassed the beer-swilling hacks who came to support the undistaff side. But despite our collective lack of glamour, best wishes for a happy future to the newlyweds.

Marriages are made in heaven, but broken in consular sections — **Steve Erlanger's** brief love affair with Idonesia has been abruptly ended by the omnipotent granters of visas in Jakarta, who have apparent-

ly banned Steve, his sons and his sons' sons from ever darkening the beach at Sanur or the palace at Jogya for an article on the "conspicuous wealth" of some highly connected offspring of some very important personage in Indonesia. The matter became more complicated when a comment by an official in Jakarta to a local wire reporter was misconstrued to paint Steve as an alcoholic, a disease unknown in our profession. Steve is leaving for Moscow out of protest, and by the time the New York Times has sorted out the Soviets' problems. Indonesia will probably be under new leadership anyway.

Ted Dunfee, formerly of the South China Morning Post until he was laid low by encephalitis (how many of you have still not got your shots?) is now back in Canada, and has reportedly uttered his first words since emerging from his coma. The FCCT fund finally amounted to over 185,000 baht, for which his family is very grateful — thanks to all contributors.

David Dyar, who left Reuters bureau in Bangkok in the summer to return to London to cover the British Prime Minister, spent little time establishing himself in the job before he got tired of Mrs Thatcher and dispatched her in favour of Mr John Major. Unlike Mrs T. David has not

Other spot news and unsubstantiated rumours...**Kevin Cooney** of Reuters and **Nick Cummings Bruce** of the Guardian excelled themselves in a Rabelaisian nine hour lunch in Saigon in November...**John Pilger's** latest Cambodia video concoction is providing welcome income for libel lawyers in London...**Tim Paige**, famed photographer of the Vietnam war, has been searching for the body of Sean Flynn, (son of Erol), who was killed by the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia...**Jeremy Wagstaff** of Reuters may go to Seoul. □

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