

French are pulling out and the services one by one are folding up. Likewise the shops. Some have been selling out, others are packing up and moving off to Hai-Phong or to Saigon. The city is in a great state of flux; every morning hordes of people go by the hotel with their worldly goods on rickety carts. The airport evacuates 2500 refugees every day; most of them are going to Saigon, so that city must have more than enough of these unfortunate people.

Prices are high; a small bar of Lux soap costs 36 cents; for instance. Jeanne Brazeau who was here said her hair-do's and all that were obsolescent and expensive. There is nothing at all here to buy, luckily, so most of us have spent almost nothing. The architecture is a mixture of French feeling and Chinese; it has a distinctive grace all its own, and is reflected in the many attractive private homes in the residential districts. They are bungalow-affairs with high shuttered windows and ceiling fans blowing in every room. Right next to us is one of the main shopping streets. There isn't much left there now except a few military tailors, some wine shops and a few book-stores (all French). There are several sidewalk cafeterias, where French Foreign Legion chaps sit and have the odd beer. There is now only one cinema, showing very old and second-rate French films. The place is apparently dirty and flea-ridden and none of us have gone. There are a couple of tired night-clubs but the prices are fantastic. One or two of us have tried it once and have not gone back. There is, however, plenty of time to walk around and to study a bit of French in the evenings. French is the language spoken here; one wonders what will happen after October 10 when the Viet-Minh government takes over. Probably it will take some time before French dies out, if at all. So I read away at some irregular verbs and try them out on the long-suffering hotel staff. The Indians don't speak much French so everyone now is getting used to our sign language or French-English sentences.

Situated in the centre of the city, not far away, is a small lake. There is a pagoda in the middle with a little temple at the other end of the lake. That end branches off into the bazaars and the more colourful, oriental part of the city. Bazaars are frequent and there are hundreds of little sidewalk stalls selling fly-ridden food, or bad spectacles, etc. I don't find the people at all attractive. They are small; the women have a horrible habit of blacking their teeth so that all you can see is a gaping, black hole. The Chinese who are here, though, are very attractive - the girls are slender, have beautiful complexions and are cleanly attired.

We had the tail end of a hurricane a couple of weeks ago; the wind blew and howled, our shutters rattled, and next day the streets were littered with broken branches and other debris. The Red River became higher and they piled sand-bags at low spots. So all of this is very new and rather exciting. I wonder what two years here will bring forth. Anyway, I'll try to keep you up to date, and let you know what's going on in this part of the world.

So long for now - As ever -

(Sgd.) Frank Finnie.

CLINICAL NOTES FROM DICTATION

Anxiety Neurosis

Each comma, hyphen, stop's dictated
Until you're almost pixilated.
Perhaps you should explain you speak
A little English, and though weak
Your grammar is, perhaps,
You know that proper names have caps.

Delayed Reaction

At five to five he buzzes through
And says there's lots of work to do.
At seven-ten, with aching head,
Dishevelled, tired, unwashed, unfed,
You hurry in and put it down,
Rewarded with an absent frown.
More likely, though, that he's gone home
And left you typing there alone.

Unnatural Birth

Poor Mr. X! We feel for you,
A woman knows what you go through.
And bringing forth is so much pain,
We wish you'd save yourself the strain,
Retiring to oh so much better
A nursing home to have your letter,
And there with nurses sympathetic
Give birth beneath an anaesthetic!

The Girl with the Notebook.