

# People

## By Wally Traling



### Reporter--Viet Nam War

My friend John Wheeler, Associated Press foreign correspondent, is back from the Viet Nam war for a rest, and passed by here.

Writers of wars need rest. Eyes that see war and ears that hear it can fill a man and push menacingly against the shell one tries to build.

He is 35 and those 13 months in Viet Nam have aged him to the good; he was a navigator on a jet bomber before settling for a while on The Sentinel to record the docile ways of life in this city; he used to say he missed "that edge of life" feeling, ergo it was natural that he would find the jungles and rice paddies of Viet Nam and that "edge of life."

He talked, directly and evenly about his routine with the AP.

He worked out of Da Nang, living in an old French hotel without ventilation.

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On a typical morning he will visit six marine battalion headquarters.

He has won their respect by going into battle with them unarmed, and when "something is up" they might say, "See you at the helicopter pad at 6 a.m. tomorrow." Destination unknown.

He shows up with paper and pencil, two or three cameras, a poncho, two canteens of water, insect repellent, a change of socks, can of sardines, cheese and dried pork. He may need these; he may not.

Helicopters carry "sticks of men," that is, small groups.

There may be three 'copters or 25 on the mission.

"When you reach where you're going, they throw you out in a rice paddy and you run like hell for cover until you can figure out what's up," he said.

Generally the purpose of this group will be to drive the Viet Cong toward a block force of troops which have been trucked and walked to a spot and set up for business. It's like driving out quail, he said.

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Wheeler tries to stick with the American advisers for information. When he watches a raid, or an air attack, or a battle, or a futile hunt, he catches a 'copter carrying wounded back to Da Nang, goes to his hotel and writes his story. He calls this to the head AP office in Saigon by phone and hands his film to any pilot going back to the capitol.

Naturally, I had to know of his toughest experience.

This occurred last Easter Sunday. He had walked for two days with six Vietnamese battalions to attack a VC base with only sporadic encounters.

About dusk on the second day, over the crest of a hill and down into the rice paddies—"everything blew up."

"The American advisers I was with jumped into holes. I was late and there were none left for me. Stupid me, I squatted and started taking pictures.

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"A lieutenant in front of me took a bullet, creasing his neck and bursting out through the back of his shoulder, blowing out a chunk of his shirt.

"It sounded like a hammer hitting a board. He fell into a hole and I went in after to do what I could.

"The VC were attacking and the rest of the groups were falling back. At times it was so noisy with firing that you had to yell to talk. The bullets don't whine like you hear on TV; they snap; the closer they are the louder they snap as they pass—I think this has something to do with breaking the sound barrier," he said.

"I helped this officer on his feet; then he started running back on his own, and fell in another ditch. I was scared.

"An American major told me to get a medic; they were busy, but he got one and it was decided to get him into an armored personnel carrier. I helped him to one but they wouldn't open the hatch because bullets were hitting the carrier.

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"I had taken off my three cameras and knapsack to help the officer and never got back to them. We ran back to the ditch until the firing eased and finally found a carrier for him. He gave me his machinegun with one clip of bullets left.

"I never did fire the thing. It wasn't my job.

"The group of five American advisers and seven or eight Vietnamese decided to form the rear guard. They'd fire and retreat and fire again.

"Those personnel carriers retreated so fast they ran over some of their own men and damn near ran me down.

"It was a frightening sight to see a wave of VC coming at us through a rice paddy. We had the advantage of the tree lines while firing and retreating.

"I guess we retreated some four miles from where we made the original VC contact before the thing was over and the VC disappeared.

"I was never prouder of anything in my life as I was of those Americans who covered the retreat. They're not supposed to do this kind of thing, but it often happens.

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"The cameras keep my hands busy in a situation like this. If I see people around me hit the deck, I follow suit," he said.

That wounded lieutenant recovered and went back to his duties.

This is a slice of war. Other slices recorded by Wheeler have been a dead child in a sorrowing mother's arms, the fate of innocent civilians, the bombings—the merry-go-round of man's inhumanity to man.

And now he is on his way back—same song, another verse as they say.

A good-looking guy charged with the desire to live on the edge of life.

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