

Chapter 1

YOUNG MISSIONARY

In March 1969 I acquired a passport for the first time in my life. After being duly schooled as to its importance I felt complete in my preparation for my new venture.

I had spent some months searching for and devouring the scant material available on the culture of Vietnam. I had swotted up a little basic French, which I understood to be the official language there. (Until recently Vietnam had been a French colony - French Indo-China). Now I was setting out with some trepidation, a lot of hope, and little idea of what was really ahead of me in my new mission appointment. The Vietnam war was at its height too, but war was something totally removed from my experience; I wondered if it was all that the media made of it.

After a short stop-over in Melbourne with our Sisters I started the second leg of my trip, the flight to Saigon. Now what? I thought.

This long journey was my first experience of international flight - if it came to that, my first experience of flying at all, apart from being taken up in a bi-plane by a friend at the age of seven or eight.

This was the real thing! On board the big plane I read every notice - what to do in an emergency - how to put on the oxygen mask, where to find a floatation cushion, how to abandon my shoes and fling myself

out of doomed aircraft. I did not fancy trying any of these measures when all we could see through the windows was white billowing clouds. I wanted no problems at all.

I placed the precious passport in the pocket of the seat in front of me, belted myself up firmly, sat tight and prayed for a safe landing. My prayers were answered and at last we came down uneventfully at Saigon airport.

I can't remember much of my first impressions. It was all a great buzzing confusion at the time - the excitement of the passengers getting their luggage out of the overheads, the general impatience to get out and away. I joined the bustle and followed the crowd into the terminal. There everybody started rummaging in handbags and pockets for - PASSPORTS! My heart stopped - crashed down to my boots - I saw mine still safely stowed in the pocket in the plane.

I rushed out of the terminal building. The plane was away over there! An empty luggage carrier was being driven past. Desperate, I ran out and stopped the driver, begging him to take me back to the plane. He kindly did so. How lucky I was that he could understand English! To my great relief the crew were still on board but my despair grew by the moment. No-one could find the lost passport. They even allowed me back into the plane to search for myself. Sure enough it was not where I'd put it. At last one of the crew informed me that it had been taken over to the terminal.

Back I went on the luggage carrier, wondering how and where to apply for lost property. Sick with worry I walked into the crowded hallway. Not far away an official was waving his arm high above all the heads, waving a small item - a small black item - a New Zealand passport - waving for its owner to come and claim it. Imagine my relief! Once that hurdle was overcome the rest seemed easy. Nothing would ever worry me again, I thought. Collecting my luggage, I was ready to step out into the unknown.