

Kate Webb Prefers Anonymity to Fame

By Craig Tomkinson

On April 8 last, North Vietnamese soldiers operating in Cambodia captured UPI's Phnom Penh chief-of-bureau and five companions about 56 miles southwest of the city. The name of the chief and the fact that she's a woman is irrelevant—but what she learned of captors and of the other side of the Indochina war is relevant at least that's how she looks at it.

Her name of course is Kate Webb and at age 28 nothing about her is irrelevant. But she eschews to write the story, not to it and she has been uncomfortable with the publicity she's received since her release following 23 days in Communist hands.

She doesn't like to be on the linking end of a notebook and as spent considerable time since her May 1 release turning down offers of appearances and interviews (with the exception of her appearance for 10 minutes on the David Frost show) which would enhance her notoriety and has been avoiding other newspeople. This involved two point changing hotel rooms twice in Hong Kong and returning to the States via Anchorage, Alaska, (the customs officer in Anchorage had read her articles).

Declines to take credit

"It's not that I'm interesting," she told E&P, "it's just that an interesting event happened to me."

Much of her time since her release has also been taken up with recovery from two strains of malaria the doctors have told her she has. She contracted the disease while a prisoner of the Communists and early attacks of it (although not identified as malaria at the time) can be read about in her four part series written for UPI on her ordeal.

The series, run page-one in many newspapers around the world, has brought a flow of mail and telegrams.

Surprisingly the mail she has gotten, from people on both sides of the political spectrum and from many countries, almost universally praise her appraisal of her Communist captors and other aspects relating to the war.

Other letters have contained everything from marriage proposals to a query on what exposures to use for shooting pictures in a jungle. She even got a bill from an old friend for the booze he consumed in mourning when she was believed dead and for his celebration when she turned up. She's going to save all the letters.

While her fate was still unknown, UPI had, in its efforts to locate her, communicated with deposed Cambodian ruler, Sihanouk, who in a return telegram from Peking praised Miss Webb's "objectivity" and pledged what help he could lend.

Miss Webb feels he may have had something to do with her release.

She also theorizes that the woman's body found by Cambodian soldiers near the place of her capture, and subsequently misidentified as hers, (E&P, April 24) was that of one of the North Vietnamese women who spend the daylight hours hidden in bunkers and consequently become fair-skinned. The body was cremated immediately so no follow-up could be effected.

Typical of Kate Webb, she said she was sorry that so many people had to go to the unnecessary work of writing her obituary. About the obits, (which she didn't read many of) she said "I have my own feelings about what was in them." She praised the obit in the *New York Times*, written by a friend who described her as a "waif, plodding the Saigon streets in a striped dress and sandals." "My feet are always dirty," she said.

Publicity unfair

She admitted to being surprised at the amount of publicity her death and "resurrection" received but was bothered by two things. She is disappointed that reporters and people seem more interested in her as a person than what she learned about the other side of the war. Her personal accounts of her captivity indeed provide a close look at what appears to be a more humanistic side to the Communist Vietnamese.

But she also feels that it's unfair that most of the world press "created such a journal-

istic thing about a girl captured." More credit and publicity should go to the others who went through the same ordeal, she believes. The others were her UPI translator-driver, a Cambodian freelance photographer, two Cambodian interpreters, and Toshiuchi Suzuki, of Japan's Nihon Denpa News newsreel company.

Miss Webb prefaced the first of her four-part series dealing with the captivity, with an acknowledgment of the important part Suzuki played. He had spent two and a half years reporting on the war from Hanoi and was fluent in Vietnamese, which the others were not. Miss Webb, who got more play in the Japanese press than Suzuki did, cited him for "his courage, diplomacy and untiring translation efforts."

Miss Webb was asked if she felt that her presence as a woman brought better treatment of the group from the captors. Her surprising reply was that her presence perhaps made it harder on them.

She reasoned that she was the only one with an affiliation to an American company (she's a New Zealand born Australian with a British passport that identifies her as a resident of Cambodia) and was suspect of being an American CIA agent. The interrogations she underwent, she said, were longer and more intense than those of the others.

She said on her return to Phnom Penh that her 23 days as a prisoner were "probably the most interesting three weeks I've had in Indochina—but an experience I think I'd rather not have had."

She hasn't changed her mind, but it's because she feels she was very lucky to come out alive the last time and wouldn't be so lucky next time. "It's difficult to convey in words the terrible fear of bombing attacks," she said. "You have to use all of your animal instincts to survive" and then only if you're lucky.

Is going back

But her ordeal will not keep her from returning to Phnom Penh, the UPI bureau and the war. She's going back as soon as she can (with a stopover in Japan to see her friend Suzuki) and she feels that she'll be able to report on the war more objectively because of her experience. She has plans too to apply for entry to Hanoi and possibly Peking, although she's not sure what the Communists' reactions were to her reports.

She said UPI too wants to be



Kate Webb

sure that her articles have not created problems that might jeopardize her safety in Indochina. But even if told she couldn't go back, she'd probably go anyway. She sees many important stories developing in Asia.

For one, the withdrawal of American combat forces from South Vietnam, in her mind, will not end the war. Both sides, it was pointed out, want unity but on their own terms. She also believes that neither side will ever be entirely free of influence from foreign powers.

Describing the evolution of reporting from Vietnam during the war years, Miss Webb said there is a parallel between what has been reported and American public opinion, with neither leading the other.

Initially, she said, the reports from Vietnam were of the typical American fighting heroics. "It's following a trend. Now, with American opinion against the war, there are so many stories about refugees and American casualties. There are too many now and there were too few before."

Credits photographers

She credits still photographers, more than any other newspeople, with bringing to light the fate of refugees and other casualties of the war.

She sees the next phase in Indochina reporting that of making known the options open to the peoples of Indochina. Reports will center on which options are chosen, why and what forces come into play in the decision making.

In her own reporting she will and will continue to avoid "useless names and figures heretofore abundant in reports from Vietnam. She reasons that the names of insignificant people and places and figures are

continued

In 1969 she resigned from and spent print media prefer to carry the country from Phnom Penh which is necessary to Phnom Penh "if the airport is in order."

Miss Webb emphasized the ease with which newsmen can fall into a dependency on the military. "The military has the transportation and if you don't use it you may miss a story. Along the way you pick up the military version."

She said the tendency for Americans, most of whom do not speak any Vietnamese, is to talk to Americans and not Vietnamese. "I'm as culpable as anyone else," she admitted. "I speak only pigeon Vietnamese after two and a half years in Vietnam. Suzuki speaks fluent Vietnamese after two and a half years in Hanoi."

She was critical too of American officials in Vietnam whom she charged with not knowing very much about Vietnam or the Vietnamese people. Specifically she cited members of the U.S. Embassy in Saigon and CIA agents.

As far as classifying the quality of newsmen in Indochina, she simply said, "there are good ones and there are bad ones—like here."

She lavished praise on the work of the British Broadcasting Company, for what she called "its ability to talk about the problems of the country. The Voice of America talks only about what Americans are doing."

In the final hours of her captivity Miss Webb was allowed to listen to BBC broadcasting. She feels it indicates the Communist's respect for the network's objectivity.

She commented on the publication of the so-called Pentagon Papers, by saying "I'm not all that excited about them. Everyone suspected what was going on. But I'm glad they came out. I feel that the papers should be published in full but there is too much emphasis being placed

on the Communist side. I'm more interested in what's going to happen to the Vietnamese."

While in the hands of the Communists the six members of Miss Webb's party were subjected to Communist propaganda "but not brainwashed."

They were given the Communist's version of a front-line newspaper, a mimeographed sheet, mostly with news of the Laos situation.

The Hanoi news gatherers, Miss Webb related, use both the UPI and AP wire services, among others, as news sources. But they aren't paying members—they intercept. And the versions they give out are frequently taken out of context or distorted.

Miss Webb recognizes that as interest in Indochina wanes with American participation, she will have to, in her words, "write it hard enough to make it read back here." She has in mind a book too.