

Record of a surgeon's war

The diary of a doctor working on the Ho Chi Minh trail reveals a cadre's ordeal.

MEMOIR

Last Night I Dreamed of Peace

By Dang Thuy Tram
Paperback Rider, 225pp, \$29.95
Reviewed by Claire Scobie

AT THE END of 1966, a young Vietnamese doctor shouldered a heavy backpack and joined a group of civilians heading south down the Ho Chi Minh trail. Dang Thuy Tram had taken up the call and volunteered to work in a Viet Cong battlefield hospital in central Vietnam. For the next three years, Thuy – as she was known – recorded her private thoughts, hopes and fears in a series of diaries, now translated into English.

Situated in a “liberation area”, a prime target for the American forces, those “blood thirsty devils”, Thuy’s thatched-roof clinic frequently came under violent assault. When a patient died under her hand – usually because of the appalling surgical conditions in which she had to operate – she blamed herself. This 25-year-old

was no hardened veteran; she was the middle-class daughter of a Hanoi family of doctors. Beautiful, intelligent, with a fragile heart, Thuy describes herself as the “dreamy girl” and “Miss Stubborn, difficult to please”.

At school, “all the boys were a little in love” with her; at her makeshift hospital, the soldiers whom she treats become her admirers. Thuy had a great need for love – and to be loved – but her connection with these young revolutionaries, her “brothers”, was innocent. Borne out of the brutal crucible of war, it was “a miraculous love ... that makes people forget themselves”. She captured the heart of many but Thuy had eyes for only one – a mysterious soldier called “M”, whom she had loved since her mid-teens. When he spurns her, she asks plaintively: “Why is a wound in the heart so hard to heal?”

This current of tenderness is in stark contrast to the backdrop of war – bombs raining down, planes screaming overhead and a jungle frazzled by Agent Orange. She stumbles across villages reduced to shells and, as the Americans advance, escapes death many times. Her medical training is rendered



Jungle fever ... a US soldier guides a helicopter during a medical evacuation for injured comrades during the Vietnam War. Photo: AP

useless when a soldier, hit by a white phosphorous bomb, is admitted with “pieces of his skin falling off, curled up like crumbling sheets of rice cracker”. Under such circumstances, it’s extraordinary that Thuy manages to be lyrical.

But there’s much about this work that is remarkable – the intimacy of reading someone else’s private thoughts; the insight into a young physician who doubts, questions and chastises herself, especially

when she falls short of being the selfless communist cadre. And then there’s the diary’s own journey to publication. Found in 1970 by an American intelligence officer, Fred Whitehurst – who, against regulations, took the diaries home – they sat in his filing cabinet for more than 20 years before Whitehurst’s brother, also a Vietnam vet, translated them.

In April 2005 they were returned to Thuy’s family and, even more

improbable, when the two men arrived in Hanoi four months later, they were adopted as “sons” and “brothers” by Thuy’s surviving mother and sisters. By then the diaries had been published and become a runaway bestseller in Vietnam. Eighteen months later 430,000 copies had been sold.

It isn’t always an easy read. The footnotes ground the content but they hinder the flow of the narrative. The diaries themselves with their sentimental, unburdened style require a certain openness by the reader to meet Thuy in all her darkest – and brightest – places. There’s no holding back. By 1970 Thuy has matured and is prepared to die for her country and clinic. With the Americans pouring in from all sides, Thuy is forced to evacuate the wounded, constantly building new shelters in the jungle. When there is nowhere left to run, she waits, “searching for the enemy’s approach”.

This is an important and profoundly moving book, which redresses the one-sided macho and gun-toting coverage of the Vietnam War. For Whitehurst, it brought him relief after years of bitterness as a Vietnam vet. “Human to human [he] fell in love with her” – it’s not hard to see why.



Claire Scobie is a Sydney reviewer.