

MCC Vietnam Story 1966-68
From War to Forgiveness
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The Vietnam War is called by two different names, depending on where you live. In the United States we call it the Viet Nam War but in Vietnam it is called the American War.

Background:

I thought I'd share a few facts about the war, to give you a sense of what happened during those years. The US was involved in all kinds of warfare, man to man combat, snipers, bombings, burning of villages, spraying land of chemical defoliates and agent orange, killings of all kind – no end to what happened.

The total number of ordinances dropped over (Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam was over 7 million ton. Remember the people of the United States were told, the US was not bombing Laos or Cambodia. However, the US dropped over 2.5 Million tons on each country, Cambodia and Laos. They are the 2 most heavily bombed countries in the world. And there are still bombs along the roadsides in all 3 countries. From 1975 to 2015 up to 100,000 people have been injured or killed by bombs left over from the war.

In 1968 the number of United States troops in South Viet Nam was 549,000.

During the war 2 million Vietnamese civilians died

1.1 million North Vietnamese and Viet Cong fighters were killed. An estimated 200,000 to 250,000 South Vietnamese soldiers died. And over 58,000 US military fatal casualties in the VN war. This number accounts for those killed, but thousands of the vet's 'died' in VN. They came home and could not cope, weren't accepted, spat upon and the pain they endured remained inside, SILENT!

Why do we get into so many wars?

Personal:

Now, I'm going to share my personal experiences and stories both, during the war and subsequent years when we have traveled to Vietnam.

The 1960's were turbulent years! There were marches, protests, and riots. There were assassinations. President John F Kennedy in 1963. Those of you living then, remember the exact location where you were when you received the news, "the President was shot". There were other assassinations - in 1965 Malcolm X was killed, Martin Luther King and Robert F Kennedy in 1968. The one constant thing during the 60's was the escalation of the War in Vietnam.

MCC began work in VN in 1954 as a Christian Relief Organization and then in 1966 Church World Service and Lutheran World Relief requested joining with MCC to supply workers and financial help. Both the Vietnamese and American governments limited the number of organizations entering VN during that time and so the three organizations became Viet Nam Christian Service (VNCS) with MCC providing leadership.

I was teaching Home Economics at Western Mennonite High School when in the spring of 1966 I received a letter from MCC stating they needed Home Economists in Vietnam and would I consider going? MCC had received a request from USAID regarding the need in Pleiku at the Agricultural Training Center for a home economist. USAID had distributed treadle sewing machines to the villages in the highlands but the villagers didn't know how to use them and the sewing machines were rusting.

I remember calling my mother and reading her the letter, it was hard for her to hear. My father died in 1962 at the age of 46, 2 of her son's would soon be going with MCC (their draft #'s were up), her youngest son's draft # would be due that fall and now her daughter was thinking of going away too? I knew this wasn't something Mother would want, but I told her that we would pray about it. The challenge and opportunity to serve with MCC was something I had wanted. However, it was soon time for me to have the fall contract submitted if I would teach another year at Western. I really didn't think MCC could gather my application, references and gain approval to make the decision for me to be accepted. Even with these I thought impossibilities, I sent my application off. A letter dated April 20, 1966 arrived stating I was accepted, and would be in the June 14th orientation in Akron, my monthly income would be \$22.50. In fact my brother Gale Gingrich and his wife Florence and my brother Byron were in the April MCC orientation when I received the acceptance letter. Gale and

Florence were going to France, Byron was going to Bolivia and now I was headed to VN.

I finished the school year, packed my few possessions, sold my car and around June 10 headed to PA (my first plane ride). There were 32 of us in orientation, mostly young men headed overseas to Haiti, Hong Kong, Congo, Mexico, Indonesia, Algeria and Vietnam and some staying in the US. The others headed to VN with me were Doug and Pat Hostetter from VA, and Carolyn Nyce, from PA (Carolyn is Nancy Friesens sister). The Claude Shisler family from Souderton had been my parents while I was away from home in college and they were there for me again. They took me to the Airport along with the other MCCers and their families. We said our good byes. Tears flowed, the feeling of affirmation, we were loved, and knowing their prayers surrounded us as we began our unknown journey.

VietNam:

We arrived at the Ton Son Nhut Airport in Saigon on July 5. Departing the plane on the Tarmac, the heat was so intense it slapped you in the face and the humidity took your breath away. The smells were different, pungent and unusual. Noise was constant and the mass of humanity everywhere. Foreign sights, barbed wire rolls everywhere, barricades surrounding most buildings, green army fatigues and all the other machinery that makes up war were present.

We were in Saigon for 2 months at the MCC Guest House to begin language study. The Vietnamese language is a difficult language. It is a tonal language with the same word having the possibility of 5 different meanings. I never became fluent in Vietnamese.

After language study I headed to Pleiku to begin my assignment. Pleiku is in the highlands, half way between the DMZ and Saigon and about 60 kilometers from the Cambodia border. My assignment was to work amount the Montegard's (ethic minorities). The tribes we would be working with were Jarai, Rade and the Bahnar, they each spoke a different dialect. The Montegards are displaced people in VN, similar to the Native American Indians in the US. They are "second class" citizens, no schools for the children to attend and they are taken advantage of.

MCC work in Pleiku was two fold – the hospital, where the doctor and 4 nurses worked. The Agricultural Training Center, where an agriculturalist and myself worked. Depending on any given time there was 8-10 of us MCC's in the Pleiku unit. I might add when I arrived we had an agriculturist but due to health

issues he left VN. The agriculturist who replaced him was with IVS (International Voluntary Service) and he was Del Epp. (small world, he is Peter Epp's father) Del and I worked together closely and we relied on each other for multiple tasks and duties.

I want to mention, I had an interpreter, Mo, who went with me everywhere. We worked with city officials, three different tribes and traveled all over, he knew the area and knew all languages, I depended on him.

The Training Center was about a mile out of town with a lovely setting. It was surrounded with Montegard villages dotting the countryside. A ravine was below the center with a creek running thru it. This is where our rice paddies and garden was located. The center had several building, 2 long houses on stilts we used for a girls dorm and the other for the boys dorm. A nice sized cement classroom building, kitchen building, small wooden sewing building and livestock stables for water buffalo, pigs and other animals.

We developed a program that included both young men and young women attending classes at the same time from the same village. The men would learn about livestock, husbandry, vegetation and planting with new and different crops (some new seeds from the US). The girls would learn how to take body measurements, make patterns, cut out fabric and sew blouses and clothing for children (our hope was they could begin to develop skills to supplement their income by taking their goods to the Vietnamese market in town). We also had classes in childcare, cleanliness, and gardening for the girls.

We visited villages and talked with the Village chiefs informing them of the programs we were offering, asking them to come and visit the center to see if it was something they would encourage their young people to attend. They did and were excited about the program. One village at a time would attend a session and students were at the center for 2 to 3 weeks with classes all day. It was very exciting to see this program become so successful. Upon completion of each class we had a large celebration for the entire village and at the end of the day's celebration the village was given a pig. This was the most exciting thing for the village --- they now had another animal to provide for the village needs. After the students completed the classes, we would check with the village if they had any questions or needed anything.

Work in Pleiku was not limited to the Training Center, there were many other places to work, the leprosy villages, the refugees villages both in distributing blankets, food and resettling them. We conducted cleanliness demonstrations near the village stream, taking the children to the stream and giving them good

scrubbing lessons. Before we started we gave each a bar of soap and towel, which they took home... they had never seen soap or owned a towel.

In 66 and first of 67 our work in VietNam was never really hampered due to living in a war zone. We went about our activities, could travel to the villages. We were always aware of the war and never went far from Pleiku. When traveling from one city to another our main means of transportation was to fly. Most of the roads outside the cities were impassable with bridges bombed out, huge bomb craters and unsafe to navigate. I also want to add that as MCC'ers we tried to remain separate from the military. We were Americans and everyone knew that. However, city officials, landlords, restaurant owners, those selling in the market, and many in the city knew we were different from the military. We also lived in town and not on a compound. We would befriend and purchase items from anyone, it didn't matter if they affiliated with the north, VC, South Vietnamese army or whoever. We remained neutral. For months we bought ice from the shop down the street and than someone told us he was a sympathizer with the north. We didn't change our place of ice purchase.

The summer of 67 things began to change for us, the war seemed to be escalating and we needed to change some of our activities. More and more of the roads we took were mined. As the war seemed to escalate closer to Pleiku, the villagers would walk into town to tell us not to travel to their village, stating the roads were mined. We did have sandbags in the Landrover, behind the driver, over the wheels, on the floorboard and in the back because we transported people to the clinic or hospital as needed. The sandbags would soften any blow if we hit a mine. Sounds and sights of mortar and artillery were closer to town, more helicopters in the air, constant stream of convoys, tanks, APC's, and the night skies were lighter from flares overhead. Plus observing the glassy, hollow and painful eyes of the GI's as they walked thru town. A side note, there were between 45,000 to 50,000 military personnel in Pleiku. The Army, Air Force and Special Forces were all located there.

It was a Sunday afternoon and Del had gone on vacation and asked that I visit the training center over the weekend. The sow had just given birth to a litter of pigs, her previous litter she laid on them and only half the litter survived. We needed these piglets to distribute to the villages. That afternoon I headed to the farm in the jeep to make sure the livestock were okay. Went around the area, checked all the pens making certain things looked good and they did. Went back to drive the jeep home but the jeep would not start (the jeep was an old jeep, left over from the Korean War). Messed with it for a while and still wouldn't start, so decided I better start walking home.

I was probably about a quarter mile away from the center, walking up the hill, absorbed in my thoughts, when all of a sudden out of NO WHERE 8-10 Viet Cong surrounded me. They wore the usual black pants & shirt uniform with AK-47's slung over their shoulders. Some were very close to me and other's several feet away. My heart was pounding but I knew I had to remain calm. I didn't want them to sense my fear! It was quiet, no one spoke immediately, so I spoke first, "Chao omg, Omg mein oie com", translated means, "Good afternoon young men, How are you?" I continued talking and asked how I could help them? The gentleman immediately to my right spoke and asked "where had I been"? Told him, he than questioned me about "what I was doing there and why I was there"? Told him. Than he asked "where I was going"? Told him I was heading home. He asked a couple more questions and I answered them. I than thanked them for talking with me and told them I needed to continue on home.

I made a couple slow steps forward and immediately they all disappeared! They disappeared as quickly as they had appeared! My immediate instinct was to run as fast as I could up the hill, but I didn't dare! I didn't want them to know I was scared to death. I walked as fast as I could up to the top of the hill and as soon as I was just over the hill I went into a fast run. I ran all the way home, entered the house and collapsed in a chair. I wept and sobbed uncontrollably!

Anything could have happened, I was alone, but they allowed me to continue walking up the hill! Home!

In the fall, one morning Mo said he had a feeling we needed to go to a specific village. We left early and as we approached the village we knew something drastic had happened during the night. We saw smoke, as we came closer fires were smoldering. Jumped out of the Landrover and the villagers surrounded us, all talking at once. They began telling us the story. The VC had been there during the night and several were killed and several injured. After we talked, assessed the situation we loaded up the injured that would go with us and took them into the hospital. Not all the maimed and injured would go with us, the Montegards have a strong belief if they are going to die they want to die surrounded by their family and in the village. We were unable to return the next day to check on the villagers. We had also been warned by the US Army that more and more of the roads outside the city were being mined heavily and not to travel unless absolutely necessary.

At this time more refugees were coming into town. I vividly recall one morning Mo and I heading to a village when off in the distance we saw a long line of

tribal people walking into town. We needed to find out what had happened. We knew what happened. The village was destroyed. So we set off to find an area to help them resettle. We did, in a space on the edge of town where it would be safe. I was walking around the area and noticed a mother with her child. The child was starving and near death. Talked with the mother and I begged her to come with me and we'd take her and the child to the hospital. I knew that was the only way he would survive. The mother refused to go with us and so told Mo we had to go to the warehouse and get bags of CSM (a high protein source of corn, soy and milk). CSM only needed water to make it nutritious and life sustaining. Went to the warehouse, brought bags of rice and CSM back and distributed it to the refugees. Mixed a small amount of water with the CSM making a porridge and gave to the mother to feed the child. He wouldn't eat and told the mother to continue trying to get him to eat. The following day went back to the refugee camp and the little boy had died early that morning. I sat and grieved with the mother.

Tet Offensive (VietNam Lunar New Year):

January 1968. More and more of our friends and city officials were asking if we were staying or leaving Pleiku over the New Year Holidays. (Tet) Many of the wealthy Vietnamese people and officials were leaving the city because they felt an attack was imminent. The American military personnel warned us to stay at home and not go outside of the house. On Sunday two of the fellows from our unit planned to go to Dak To because they needed to repair some rabbit hutches. But the Pleiku Air Force chaplain, expecting a VC attack that night and not wanting the four of us women left alone, advised the fellows to stay.

On Monday, January 29 Mo and I went to Plei Jut, a small village about 3 Kilometers away, to tell the young teacher who worked with me, not to come to the Training Center that week. Knowing we would never make it by the roads due to land mines, we drove over the hills and through rice paddies. As we were coming back from Plei Jut, Mo yelled "Ami, look" and in the distance a Spooky was bombing a village where we had been working a few days before, the plane would swoop down, drop a bomb and repeat the bombing run. Were any of our friends hurt? Heartbreaking sight!

Tuesday evening, January 30, the eve of the VN Lunar New Year, our unit stayed home. We sat around singing folk songs and playing games. It was dark and the Vietnamese were beginning to celebrate with the usual fire works. So one didn't know what fireworks were for celebrating and which might be real fire works. But everyone retired to bed early, some slept and others could not.

January 31, predawn... was awakened by the loudest noises ever heard. Jumped out of bed, with bullets whizzing by my window and opened my door. Becky was in the hallway coming from her room worried what was happening. We both knew what the noises were but didn't want to believe it. As we stepped out on the veranda, there sat Wayne calmly taping the noises. He told us to wake the other girls and head to the fellows bedroom (it was designated our hiding place should we ever get hit, there were no exterior walls and we had extra mattresses to shield ourselves). The noise and commotion increased. Light fixtures fell, doors flew open, windows broke, plaster fell from the ceiling and items falling off the shelves. The North Vietnamese army and VC had made the school across the street from our house, their head quarters. They had dug underground tunnels and had been there for some time and we did not know it. Early that morning as a convoy drove up the road the VC started firing. They hit a tank. All hell broke loose!!

Suddenly, above the noise and commotion we heard an American voice. About the same time our Chinese neighbors yelled, NURSES. Dead and wounded GI's were brought into their house and medical help was needed. During the next few minutes the nurses scaled the wall to help. The rest of us huddled in a sheltered spot behind our house. Suddenly an American soldier came running to where we were were hiding, yelling for us to run as far back as we could. The VC hit a tank directly in front of our house and they expected it to blow up any minute. The guys literally thru us over a wall and we ran for our lives. We ran into a Vietnamese house and flattened out on the floor. Not a soul was around! After we had been in the house for a while we heard a Special Forces Major yell, "WOMEN". I stuck my head around the corner of the hut and in the center of the alley was a circle of Mike Force men. The Major yelled for us to run into the circle. Away we ran down the street, inside the circle and ran for the armed jeep where other Special Forces were guarding a jeep. We piled into the jeep with some of the Mike Force men and away we went.

We were evacuated to the Mike Force Camp and stayed there until 5 pm. Those were long, heavy hours of worrying, praying and sitting in silence. None of us said much, none of us wanted to.... our hearts were heavy, we did not know what had become of the men in our unit or the other missionary families.

At 5 pm we were moved to the 71st Evac Hospital where they cared for us. Here we found the missionary families but it wasn't until the next morning we learned the MCC fellows were safe at the Pleiku Air Force base. We were not allowed to go back to our house for almost 2 weeks.

On February 2nd we received a telegram the VNCS Retreat was canceled and 5 Christian Missionary & Alliance missionaries were killed in Banmethout, 2 captured and 2 wounded. Such sad news...we were spared!

On February 7th received another telegram, their has been no news from the Hue unit. Not sure if they are captured or killed... pray!

February 10 Some one arrived from Saigon. It was great to see Jerry! The verdict...all wife's with children were being evacuated to Malaysia. Single gals were encouraged to stay but could leave. Males were required to stay. We received word that the Hue unit was okay and all workers accounted for.

During this time life was getting depressing. Uncertain of life around us, rockets and mortar constantly pounding the base. Sirens going off in the middle of the night and you would grab the top mattress and pull it down with you as you hit the floor. The extra mattress was to protect you from shrapnel. One afternoon I went to the chapel on the Army base. I was alone, walked down the aisle and sat in a chair close to the front. I put my head in my hands and sobbed. I told God all my fears and I needed some kind of affirmation he was walking with me in this hell. I sat there for some time, praying and crying. Decided I had to pull myself together and get back to the barracks since no one knew where I was. As I was about to get up, I saw a hymnbook on a chair. Picked it up, opened the book and the song on that page was....

Be still my soul! The Lord is on they side,
Bear patiently the cross of grief or pain
Leave to they God to order and provide,
In every change He faithful will remain
Be still, my Soul! Thy best, they heavenly Friend
Through thorny ways leads to a joyful end.

Be still my soul! Thy God doth undertake,
To guide the future as he has the past.
Thy hope, they confidence, let nothing shake;
All now mysterious shall be bright at last.
Be still my soul! The waves and winds still know
His voice who ruled them while He dwelt below.

Be still my soul! The hour is hastening on.
When we shall be forever with the Lord,
When disappointment, grief, and fear are gone,
Sorrow forgot, loves purest joys restored.

Be still, my Soul when change and tears are past.
All safe and blessed we shall meet at last.

That was my ANSWER! The affirmation!

It came over me so calmly, I could live or die, he was with me. Christ was present....there!

That song has always been very special to me. In my deepest hell – God was there!

We were allowed back in our house February 12. What a welcome sight!

After we got to go home, life was in a limbo. We were not allowed to travel, lots of work to be done but we could do or go anywhere. Week after week, nothing seemed to change and the continued mortar and rocket fire was present in the city. It was discouraging. I wasn't sure what to do, so went to Saigon. That is when Carolyn and I decided we would go back home. We left the end of March. It was an emotional ending of our time in VN as we boarded the plane. We were privileged young women, we had options, while many were living in the midst of uncertainty and never knew what the next day would bring. It was a very difficult decision!

When I left Vietnam in 68, never in my wildest dreams did I think I would return numerous times to visit that beautiful land. I have had the privilege and joy of being with the people and observing their gracious spirit as they welcome Americans back to their country after all the atrocities and tragedies we inflicted upon the country and them as a people.

They have forgiven us and accept us so graciously. I want to relate a couple personal stories of those “God Moments” for me. I have two Asian daughter in laws one Cambodian (Ana) and the other Vietnamese (Tra). Several years ago we went to VN with my brother Gale and his wife Florence. Tra's mother wanted us to visit the family lycee farm, further north of Hanoi, so our son rented a van and 10 of us headed out one morning. We walked around the farm had lunch with relatives; cousins, aunts and uncles. In the afternoon when getting ready to leave Tra's mother asked Florence and I to go with her she wanted to take us somewhere. So we went with her and she took us to a wall with a door and inside was the family Buddhist shrine.

She turned to the two of us, took our hands in hers and asked if she could go in and pray for us. We said yes. She entered while we waited outside and when she came out she hugged each one of us. That gesture meant so much to Florence and I, she thought enough of us to ask if she could pray for us.

I had always hoped I could return for the 50th Anniversary of the Tet Offensive. And it came to pass. Last January 2018, we were in Vietnam. Upon arrival my daughter in law's entire family always come over in the evening to welcome us and visit. They did, and after all the formal welcoming and chatting, Tra's father came up to me and said, "Where were you 50 years ago tonight".....I knew exactly what he meant. Where was I on the day of Tet 50 years ago, I told him "I was running for my life". He responded with, "I thought so". I turned to him and said, and where were you 50 years ago. He said "I was on the Ho Chi Minh trail, somewhere between Laos and Cambodia, supporting my troops". I said, "you were on the Ho Chi Minh Trail"? "Yes!" He said, "we have come a long way". I said, you are right and it's because your people have accepted and forgiven all the wrongs we American did to your people and land that has made that happen.

On a previous visit we walked to the lake where John McCain was shot down and captured in Oct 1967. The Vietnamese had built a memorial of him falling from the sky, with his arms up. This past summer after John died, I received an email from the VN Peace Commission stating the outpouring love and respect the Vietnamese people were expressing at the memorial. They were leaving incense and flowers, and not far away was the Hanoi Hilton where John had spent 5 years imprisoned.

I believe this is what happens when we begin to see each other as one of us, without colored lenses!

We must continue sharing Christ's love for each person, no matter race or religion. His love and acceptance goes beyond borders and ethnicity. As adults, parents and grandparents we need to encourage our children, youth, and young adults to become involved in service activities in our state, around the United States and throughout the world. The world has shrunk in my life span!

Questions:

Now I want to ask if there are any questions you'd like to ask me? I may not know or have an answer but you are welcome to ask.