

# Friendship News



PROJECT **11** INSTALLMENT **3** OF **4**

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# The Vietnam I never knew

Rachael Ward



As a student of American politics at university, “Vietnam” was never far from my mind. I chose to travel on the FFAVN project, in part because I realized that the “Vietnam” which I studied during my undergraduate years was almost entirely constructed from American experiences and had little to do with the actual country and its people. My visit, as I originally envisioned it, had a dual purpose. I was interested in seeing the country and places that had left such an indelible mark on the politics, lives and bodies of many men and women of my parents’ generation. More importantly, however, I hoped that the work I would do with FFAVN would help me find a way to peer from behind my American perceptions and see the story that hadn’t been narrated to me, the post-war nation which rhetoric left behind.

Upon arriving in Vietnam, however, a nasty cold and the chaos of Saigon threatened to obliterate my two missions in a haze of smog and decongestant. In and amongst the motorcycles, markets and backpackers, history, modernity, nationality and politics all seemed to blur, and I wasn’t even sure what I was looking for any more. It wasn’t until the juxtaposition of a memorial service, a children’s party and a trip to the Cu Chi tunnels all in one busy Christmas day that I began to understand the significance and meaning of my two visions, and how they might possibly fit together.

**Christmas morning, 2004, began in a way that no Christmas for me ever had before.** Instead of being roused at an early hour by my younger siblings, eager to dig into their Christmas loot, I was instead awakened by a program of announcements and patriotic music sponsored by our hosts, the officials in charge of this district. Rather than cozying up at breakfast in a warm house as refuge from the cold winter air, our group ventured out into the hot, muggy atmosphere of Long An province, walking in the morning fog along narrow dirt

ridges in order to reach our first destination, **a memorial service.**

Initially, this occasion too seemed out of place on what is ordinarily for me a festive day. But when Joseph started to speak about the war, and dedicated a small patch of unmarked ground to the soldiers who had never returned home, I looked around the wooded hollow and thought of how these men (and some women) my own age, separated by a generation, might have perceived this place over thirty years before on some other similarly incongruous Christmas morning. Instead of the warm welcomes and friendly faces that greeted me, perhaps they felt hostility and fear in and amongst these same fields, forests and hamlets. In their memory, and in memoriam of Gia Hoa’s siblings and father, we placed incense in ground that, I pondered, had absorbed far more than its share of blood, strife and loss on all sides of the conflict. I stood in silence, struck by a mixture of familiar and unfamiliar reminders of sadness, war and loss.

The silence and contemplation didn’t last long, however, because we were soon due back at a nearby homestead where we were to host a **Christmas party for local children.** I became worried that my now-somber mood would darken the occasion, but the joy I normally associate with the holiday soon returned in full force courtesy of a group of



screaming, excited children, thankfully born too late and too young to have understood or experienced the horror and loss we had just been memorializing. As I attempted to help them string colored beads along string and prevent the younger children from eating their party favors, I realized that I was having a fabulous time, but also that I was surprised this was so.

Upon reflection, I realized that the joy at this party wasn't what I was expecting to find. That is the part of Vietnam that is most often obscured in the narratives of loss and death I was most familiar with. I thought I was the one who was going to be bringing holiday cheer, but instead it was a bunch of bead-bedecked six years olds who brought it to me.

After a feast befitting a holiday at the guest house we had left a few hours earlier, our visit to the **Cu Chi tunnels** for the second time that day brought home the reality of the scars of war. In this case they are so deep they are etched into and through a wooded landscape—explosive-created hollows above and dark, narrow, dirt tunnels below. The polemical introductory film and exhibit explanations gave me a strong dose of the “other side” of the story I was looking for. While it was fun (and occasionally terrifying) to scurry around under and pop out of the ground like



moles, the fact that the makers of these ingenious tunnels had once been seeking to kill my countrymen was never far from my mind. That night at dinner we sat and watched a beautiful sunset while what seemed like veritable islands of vegetation in the river flew by at breakneck speed. At the time, my whole day seemed like a muddle, and I wasn't sure what to make of it.



As I reflected on the trip afterwards, I thought of my experiences on the trip as a whole kind of like those clumps of plants. Most moments, encounters and observations in those two weeks went by so quickly, I could barely catch them in a journal to make sense of it all before something else happened that challenged my way to conceptualize the information. Other moments, however, like Christmas day, became moored on the edges of my memory as an analytical tool, grabbing more and more observations from the stream of memory, until, like everything else, they broke away themselves.

Reflecting on my trip to Vietnam two months out, I have slowly realized that my two visions of what I was looking for in Vietnam were just that—my visions. Thanks to Gia Hoa, Joseph Meissner and the FFAVN trip, I was able to have experiences which showed me that Vietnam exists not only in them, and in their combination, but most importantly beyond them; flying down the river so quickly I feel grateful for the moments I was able to catch a glimpse of it. ■

# MUD BATHS

## in Vietnam

The mud baths in Vietnam soften, smooth and exfoliate the skin. Even your crinkles. That is what was posted on the sign, along with other tid bits of information on how to perform this ritual. First, we are to rinse with water/shower, soak in a tub of mud at a temperature of 35 degrees Celsius, relax for 15 minutes, rinse off and return to mud bath to soak for another 30-45 minutes and last but not least, finish with a high pressure mineral shower.

What actually happened? Arriving at the mud baths we were all quite excited. Paying our 50,000 dong apiece we all scurried off to change into our suits. I don't think any of us knew what to expect. We emerged from the change room armed with towels and made our way towards the shower. Unsure of how to use the shower we were all surprised to find the water sprayed when our weight was applied to the metal squares underneath the showerheads. Dripping wet, we headed towards our bath.

The luxuriousness I had envisioned of a woman laying and relaxing in a tub of thick, dark mud, a towel wrapped in her hair, eyes

closed with cucumber slices covering them quickly disappeared from my mind as we approached our cement tub that was being filled at that moment with lukewarm runny mud. The mud was a grayish, brown color that ran through our fingers like water. We all got in the tub and waited for more mud to cover our bodies. The establishment was so kind to supply us with buckets.

Buckets of mud were being poured over our heads, through our hair and into our eyes and mouths. Mud was everywhere! Starting off in a chant, making sure everyone didn't have a speck of clean skin we progressed with the song, "(so and so) is having a mud bath!" the person named said, "Who me?!" We replied back, "Yes, you!" Which was followed by a series of endless buckets of mud being thrown

at that person until they named someone else who was taking a mud bath.

Following laughs, shrieks, groans, giggles and mud tossing, it ended up being a great memory of my time in Vietnam. I highly recommend taking the time for a visit to the local mud baths. Guaranteed to be a unique, fun and unforgettable experience. ■



**Rhiannon Milowski**

# When reality exceeds expectation

Amber Louise Tinney

When I signed up for this project, I signed up anticipating visits to schools, nursing homes, hospitals, and, if we were lucky, a leprosy village. Through visiting these places we would see first hand the conditions most Vietnamese people live with. We would bring gifts, sing songs and hopefully make someone's day a little brighter for it.

With just three days left of the project, we had done most of these things. Our first visit to a home for disabled and elderly people was very sobering, upsetting and touching for everyone. Back in Australia, I grew up seeing many different nursing homes – both through my mother, who was a nurse, and my grandfather, who was a patient.

I have visited my grandfather, finding him lying in sheets soaked with urine, crying because he did not wish his daughter and granddaughter to see him this way. I have spent Christmas with Mum on the psychiatric geriatric ward, having to keep my cabbage patch doll away from certain patients with wool fetishes. I have seen wards of people strapped to their beds, for their safety and for the safety of others.

However these places now seem positively luxurious in comparison. At least Gampa had sheets to lie on, and a mattress and pillow. At least he could have a private room, and those who couldn't were still only sharing with five others. But most of all, at least he had family to visit.

The school visits were happier – enthusiastic children ready to learn anything and grateful for the pencils and notebooks we could provide. The children were bright and on the ball, cunningly hiding pencils so they could receive more. I, for one, certainly wish my students in Japan would show that much gumption sometimes!

Then to Nha Trang, and a visit to the children's ward in the hospital. This is where reality exceeded my expectations as I was, somewhat unwillingly, given the opportunity to experience a Vietnamese hospital from the inside. After a seemingly endless night of crippling pain and uncountable trips to the toilet, a doctor ordered me to hospital – the same one we were due to visit that day.



I have never before ridden in an ambulance, but I have seen them and know what the inside should look like. The bare stretcher, wooden chair and lonely bench did not exactly live up to my expectations. Here, it would seem, the sole purpose of an ambulance is to transport sick people to hospital. It is not a mini-hospital on wheels, as back home.

At this point, I would like to put in a disclaimer that these are merely observations and speculations from my one, small experience. Other rooms, wards, hospitals, ambulances may be completely different.

Upon arrival, I was told to lie on a bed in what I guess was the emergency room. I had been taken there due to expected appendicitis. While my lovely roommate had been very

cheerful and told me what a breeze an appendectomy was, I was still very scared.

The obvious reason being that I was in a hospital in a third world country. Whilst the doctors were probably as good as those back home, there almost certainly wouldn't be the same equipment available to them. I was scared also about communication. I have enough difficulty explaining to doctors back home that I require higher doses of anaesthetics and painkillers, how on earth would I explain it here?

Fortunately the first doctor to see me spoke good English and had a very calm, reassuring manner. I immediately felt safe under his care. He was also the bearer of the good news that I didn't have appendicitis. He did however, still wish to hospitalise me overnight.

I was moved from the emergency room, which had become so crowded some of the beds were doubling up on patients. The new room seemed to be an intensive care ward. Some patients were hooked up to breathing regulators, some were attached to heart monitors. Between two beds there was a heart restarter. As well as the nurse and doctors in white, there were people around wearing hospital issue blue smocks. They did not appear to be trained nurses, however each was focused on tending the basic needs of one patient. My guess is that they are either family members or volunteers, come to help monitor the patients and give them the individual care for which the hospital staff do not have the time.

Having had blood taken, an IV attached and a brief visit from Joseph and Ms Ryan, I was moved once more to a room occupied by one other. The corridors were crowded, and many people hovered in the lift foyers, seeking entrance to the wards. Only some were successful. The wards themselves were separated from the lift foyers by locked doors. The nurses did not carry keys, instead they had to ring a bell for someone inside the ward to come and unlock the door. Why all this security? Possible reasons crowded my head, but as I had no-one to ask, I have no definite answers.

This new room was less sparse than I expected: it contained a refrigerator, TV, two cupboards and two bedside tables. The refrigerator surprised me, but I was to realize later its reason for being there.

**It would appear that as well as bring your own illness, the hospital was bring your own pillow, food and toilet paper as well. There were no meal trolleys going around, nurse visits were infrequent and no buzzer to call for help.**

I later discovered that the person whose room I was sharing was a former Mother Superior. She had been in the hospital for two weeks, close to dying, and just two days prior had been moved out of intensive care. Throughout the day various Sisters visited her, bringing with them food to stock the fridge, pillows and blankets for her comfort and statues of Mary to sit on the fridge and watch over the room. There was one Sister there the whole day, who came over to talk to me. We managed to exchange names – hers was Tanh— and establish that she knew French and I was limited to English.

Later in the afternoon a new sister arrived and was brought to my bedside by Tanh. Her name was Sister Anne and she spoke English. She told me that Tanh had called her, requesting her to come and see me. Tanh was very worried because she had seen no-one come to visit me all day, but she could not speak with me to find out why. She was worried that I was lonely with no friends or family around. Tanh's thoughtfulness and concern touched me deeply.



Sister Anne talked with me, smiled at me and held my hand. She went looking for a pillow for me, and when she couldn't find one, she made one out of a rolled up blanket. She administered the medicine left for me at the correct times, shared food with me and called the doctor when I was in pain. She introduced me to various members of her congregation, all coming to visit their former Mother Superior. She even introduced me to their bishop. At a time when I most wanted to have my mum by my side, I was sent an angel, bearing the same name. What better omen could I wish for.

At Ms Ryan's request, Sister Anne stayed through the night with me, sleeping on the floor and waking me when it was time for medicine. She only left in the morning, once I had assured her the pain had diminished significantly. She said she would return soon,

and I assumed she left to do other duties, or catch up on some sleep – after all, when she answered Tanh's call the day before, I do not think she expected to spend the whole night in the hospital. But no, she had simply gone to prepare some rice soup for me, which she brought back just as arrangements were being made for my release.

Of all my experiences on this project and all the people I've met here in Vietnam, Sister Anne will always hold a very special place in my heart and memories. She gave of her time, her compassion and her love so selflessly to a complete stranger. Here in Nha Trang, in a hospital bare of all but minimal equipment and staff, I experienced and witnessed a depth of love and compassion I've not felt in any hospital elsewhere. I have no photo of Sister Anne, but some smiles you never forget. ■







## Visiting the Sick

the Hospital Experience in Nha Trang By Stephanie Arndt

Visiting a hospital, that was supposed to be the last task of the Vietnam project 2004, and so, on December 29, 2004, we found ourselves in the meeting room of a hospital in Nha Trang.

Outside, the temperature had already reached its climax for the day: the sun was shining from a blue sky, the air was steaming and tourists on the way to the beach were passing by.

Inside white cold walls, the smell of diseases and sickness, children crying with pain, parents sitting on their children's hospital bed: the contrast could not have been any bigger.

Before we actually went to see the hospitalized children, the director of the hospital talked to us and invited us to share some parts of the hospital's history. These talks could hardly cheer me up, though: we had just spent a nice Christmas and were on the edge of celebrating the New Year, and here were children dying from malaria or cholera or just a cold, because the hospital did not have the means or necessary medicine to help them get well again. These children might never see the blue sky again, never inhale the fresh sea breeze any more, and not even make it to into the new year. It

could not be any more depressing.

Still, we had come to Vietnam with a message, namely to help those people and by spending some time with them, to make life more enjoyable for them, at least for the time of our presence.

So, here we went with our many little gifts for the children, this time especially toys and stuffed animals, our Christmas songs and Paul's famous guitar. While some of us were distributing those little presents to the children, others played with the children, and the choir went from room to room in order to sing to the little patients and their families.

Back outside, everyone of our group was probably ready to leave the hospital, but there was still another task to do, namely the planting of five palm trees: ■ one for Gia Hoa's and Tam's father ■ one for Joseph's father who had passed away just a couple of months ago ■ one for the Vietnamese War veterans ■ one for Dr. Gerhard Flegel, a Vietnam Veteran and the first Medical Director for the Friendship Foundation who passed away suddenly. ■ one for the participants in the Vietnam Project 2004

This was the last mission of our trip, maybe the hardest one at all. ■

# the Vietnamese smile

is the memorable characteristic of the people I met. This is a toothy, broad ear to ear smile, utterly contagious while inviting you to converse, help someone practice their English, laugh, share a drink, answer a question or buy something.

It was a surprise to me, coming to Vietnam to volunteer, to constantly be greeted by young and old alike with a smile. As a volunteer I made the grave error of assuming that since they must have so little in material possessions they would have nothing to smile about. As an American whose only association of Vietnam is of the war, I felt timid upon arriving. Would people here not like me or be cold to me?

The people of Vietnam have survived war and many challenges. They continue to treat visitors with hospitality. They could withhold their smile from those of us who visit. Yet they continue to make the most of the resources they have at hand while enjoying life, and remaining curious and congenial towards visitors. They cultivate their smile like a tireless farmer manages his fields through torrential rains and infestation. They bask in their own tireless efforts, and we warm ourselves in their glow.



A short time ago

I remember

Wind blowing through my hair

I rode behind the “motor-bike motor-bike?” driver

Watching some palm trees go by

Eager to speak English

Together we sang the alphabet

He couldn't stop exclaiming about an incredible breakfast eaten with a friend

I thought about the large amount of mango I had eaten that morning

We continued on to our destination.

A pace of careful weaving in a traffic jungle of cargo bicycles and pedestrians.

Arriving back I dismounted to receive a special happy new year cheap price

## Sharing moments



I saw so many things

Women selling buying nodding  
smiling pushing frowning  
crouching clutching,  
most wearing conical hats.

So many merchants, so many goods, **wonderful forbidden market fruit shakes**

Children in the street wiping their hands and wanting to shake ours,  
on the beach selling, in school singing, at temples asking waiting needing.

Gentle people stacked together in beds on boards some looking some reaching  
all wanting a hello touch

Curious multi-questioned villagers and a herd of small people  
as a welcome escort while we wandered discovering.

Broken eager English French swapped for some barely learned Vietnamese.

We met these people and spent a short while sharing moments in a country with truly incredible smiles. I find it hard to express, but everyone I spent time with was so warm and welcoming and I really value the experiences that I was able to have as a volunteer on this project. I think that it has affected my perspective positively, enforcing the idea of human connection and the importance of interaction and sharing.

Many thanks to the Friendship Foundation. ■

**Veronica Lussier**