

SOUTH EAST ASIA RELIEF FOUNDATION

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NEWSLETTER # 1
2, December 1991

We are planning on putting out a newsletter each quarter, to help keep our friends informed on the activities we carry out. If you have comments or opinions, please let me know. We hope that this newsletter will make you feel more a part of the work we are all trying to do.

Our medical relief team has just returned to the U.S. We spent over five weeks in Asia, most of that was in Vietnam. The team consisted of Vice-President Don Benson, our translator, Linh Benson, our director of nursing, Jeanne Clendenon and myself.

We delivered over \$120,000.00 worth of medicine and medical equipment to six facilities. The Amerasian center in Saigon, Can Tho orphanage, Can Tho pediatric hospital, Long Xuyen Hospital, Long Xuyen senior center, Friendship clinic in Vung Tau, and surveyed the pediatric hospital in Saigon for a future shipment. We held meetings with many Vietnamese officials, including, Ambassador Bong in Saigon. That was a very productive meeting, which I will go into later in the letter.

Time was spent in Bangkok, where we were able to set systems to move medical supplies, with greater ease than in the past. We are all very pleased with the entire mission. There are many lives that will be spared because of the work that you have all done. This is the Christmas gift we took to Vietnam this year. It means much more than any other gift we could have given to the children. Every care giver we met with, asked us to take their deep appreciation back to you for the gifts that you helped send to them.

As most of you are aware, we left considerable supplies here in the states. We just couldn't afford to ship everything. We have enough on hand to make another trip with, and are trying to put one together as you read this. We are going to try to get an emergency shipment made to the Pediatric hospital in Saigon. After seeing this hospital, we felt compelled to act as quickly as possible. The hospital holds 1050 children, most of the beds we saw had the usual two to three children in them. Fever, infection, malaria, and burns take a horrible toll. And as usual, the hospital is understaffed. But every doctor and nurse we met, were the most dedicated, caring people you have ever seen. There are simply not enough of them. They work with almost nothing. The medical supplies they have are old, crude and in many cases, they make themselves. So this is the next target for medical aid.

We plan on a visit to Hanoi this next trip. It is a necessary step in the continuation of our work. So we will go to Hanoi first, then to Da Nang, Qui Nhon, then down to Saigon to the pediatric hospital. From there, well, we'll see what kind of funding we can put together. Can Tho and Long Xuyen need everything we can get to them, if we can't locate the med's and funding we'll deliver there again.

One, sour note, I don't wish to dwell on, but think it's important to mention. The reason we take everything in, personally, why we go where the med's go and follow up on their administration. We found the black market in Saigon and photographed it. Don shot video, I shot stills. Laid out on sidewalks were tarps, covered with modern medical supplies. Many donated by organizations ship directly to the country intended, but don't accompany the shipment. A good deal of medicine delivered in this manner, winds up on the black market. Hospitals and doctors cannot afford to purchase from the black market. So those who can afford the high prices have med's and the hospitals go without. This is the reason we spend the money and take the time to take the supplies in and deliver them in person. What we deliver to the hospitals, is used on the patients! There is simply no other way to do it!

On a brighter note. Our director of nursing, Jeanne Clendenon, has picked up an official nick name. All over Saigon and the Delta, she has come to be known as 'Momma Jean'. Jeanne has always been a favorite of the kids, wherever we went. She always has a backpack full of old film containers, filled with tiny toys and candy. She also picked up a load of blue plastic boats, on cards, from Mc Donalds, and everywhere we went, you'd see little blue boats in fountains, rivers, ponds, mud puddles, and kids holding film containers, sucking on a piece of hard candy. I was walking one night in Saigon, when a girl about 10 approached me and asked in I was one of the Americans who came to Vietnam with Momma Jean. I laughed and asked if she knew Momma Jean. She said no, not yet, but all the children of the street know about her. In Vietnam, that's the kind of fame you can't buy, you have to earn it. And our Jeanne has!

That brings me to another bright area, the thank you's to some special people. Brigid and Randy Heckman went way out of their way to secure boxes and boxes of drug store items like vitamins, cold remedies, aspirin, ointments, bandages ect. Those things were a big hit at every facility. Thai Air was a big help. Cathy Condry, of the Seattle office, customer services, saved the day for us. I can't go into it, but we owe her a big one. Linh Benson was certainly a key player on this one. Without Linh's skills as an interpreter, we would have been in deep Kim Chee. We found out that we will never be able to make one of these trips without her. Tom and Sue Moore, of Poulsbo, were involved at every step. We thank them for all the hard work they did to help. And, Tom Moore, has accepted the position as our newest board member. Tom is the new treasurer of S.E.A.R.F. and as soon as he learns to count, he's going to be handling all of our financial affairs. Welcome aboard Tom!

On the same note. Don Benson has assumed the office of Vice-President. I am very pleased at this, Don has been doing the job, now he holds the position. Don is also going to be our director of Field Operations. As soon as we get all the details set, Don and Linh will move to Vietnam to live and will run the in-country operations, overseeing the day to day operation. This takes a certain dedication, Vietnam is not an easy place in which to live. And we have obtained tentative permission from Ambassador Bong for this to happen. We also obtained permission to open an office in Saigon and further cooperations. We are very pleased, as these things are very difficult to obtain. We are working on permission to bring our own aircraft into Vietnam and the use of airfields. So a great deal of progress has been made.

In the progress and new programs department. we have a great deal to add.

An aid organization I was in contact with prior to our departure for Vietnam, came up with a very good idea. They stated that if we could get it going, they would fund it. Well, unfortunately, the funding had disappeared when we got home and checked back with them, but we had accomplished so much, with the Vietnamese, and American doctors, that we have decided that this is just too valuable a program to scrap, so we are going to try to make it happen on our own.

The concept was to be called, 'Doctors To All Peoples' So we met with a great many Vietnamese officials and doctors, including the dean of the Medical school at the University in Saigon, Professor Truong Trung. Everyone we talked with, including Ambassador Bong, thought it was a wonderful program and urged us to try to make it a reality.

We were able to obtain approval for visas for American doctors, on short notice. Access to hospitals and clinics, ease in allowing medical supplies to enter Vietnam, and a great many other pledges of cooperation from the Vietnamese. We obtained approval for multiple entry visas for our team members, and another person we have been in contact with, Chut Faris is gathering medical books for the University medical school, we will take them in for her. She undertook this project after visiting Professor Truong Trung.

We have also found several American doctors and nurses who have agreed to go to Vietnam to treat, teach and learn. As Professor Truong Trung said, all medical knowledge in Vietnam, is pre 1975. We are 15 to twenty years behind in all facets of medicine. I found that many of the modern medications we took in, required instruction for use. The doctors there, have just not seen any medical updates since the end of the war.

All these things are going to take money. This program is something that we are going to see happen, but when, is the question.

I will seek funding from all the sources we already know about. In the past, none have offered funding, but we have to keep trying. What we need from you, are ideas. If you have an idea, or know of some person or individual you can contact, please do so. We are trying to raise money for the February mission as well as the Doctors to all Peoples program. And as always, we will certainly accept any contributions you wish to send. But what we really need, is a secure source of funding so we can develop a long term plan of action. We will continue with our program, as we have in the past. But if everyone involved will keep funding sources in their minds, we might just come up with something permanent.

I believe I've covered everything. Our newsletters will get better as we develop more experience, please excuse the errors in this edition, I am most certainly not a journalist.

And most of all. Thank you for your interest and support you have shown. We will let you know when we will be showing the slides and video, and we hope you will attend. You should see for yourselves how much you have helped those kids.

One more thing. The Amerasian center. The Vietnamese are building a vocational center to train Amerasians in skills, so they can earn a living. They are also building a medical center. This is one of our priorities. We must supply the medicine and equipment for the new center. The Vietnamese can build the buildings, but can not purchase the supplies. We also found a new problem that we must address. Second generation Amerasians. Our kids are having kids! We saw many of them at the center this trip. They are going to be in need of medicines too, so we have a lot of work to do. The U.S. is contributing nothing to this project. So we'll do what we can. Thanks again for all your support. We'll let you know when the slides and video will be shown.

ED:

Four reach out to help Vietnamese kids



Karen Stallwood/The News Tribune

Don Benson brought back pictures of the grim conditions that led him and three friends to start a relief organization.

By Dan Voelpel
The News Tribune

The sight of children dying in squalid Vietnamese orphanages and medical clinics has motivated three Vietnam War veterans and a Seattle congressional aide to found a relief organization to help those children.

The four men had not planned to dive into the international aid business when they toured Vietnam in November. They went primarily to search for Amerasians, children fathered by U.S. soldiers during the war that ended in 1975.

The delegation wanted to register the Amerasians for a refugee program that would allow them to come to the United States. It registered a few.

But the children, many dying from afflictions treatable in the United States, made the biggest impression with the Americans, said Puyallup veteran Don Benson.

"When we came out of some of those places, there was not a dry eye in the crowd," said Dan Rogers, an aide to U.S. Rep. John Miller (R-Seattle). "Those people could not understand why we were so emotional. It's just an everyday existence to them."

So the veterans and Rogers founded the South East Asia Relief Foundation to promote health care, preventive medicine and family planning programs among the children, initially in the southern provinces of Vietnam.

"We knew we had to do something when we got back to Saigon from touring the rural areas. But we didn't know what," Rogers said. "When we all got home, we were kicking ideas around, and decided this was something we had to do."

The foundation already has received a pledge of 185 pounds of medicines at reduced cost from California-based Direct Re-

lief International, but the foundation needs \$1,100 to pay for them, said Wes Anderson, a Poulsbo veteran who serves as treasurer.

Congressman Miller, meanwhile, has helped the group apply for some federal grants, Rogers said.

The foundation needs approximately \$85,000 to ship supplies and send a team to Vietnam in November for three months to distribute the supplies, Rogers said. The members take no salaries.

The supplies will go directly from the foundation to the clinic and orphanage operators, not through any Vietnamese government officials, said Benson, foundation secretary.

The need goes beyond medicine, however. The foundation hopes to gather bulk nylon netting to cover windows, microscopes, portable well-drilling equipment to find potable water, blankets and simple toys such as stuffed animals, airplanes and wooden spoons.

Some skeptics already have asked the group why they don't direct their energy toward poor American children instead.

"Over here, you have lots of people trying to help. Four more guys in the states is not going to make a difference," said Rogers, foundation president. "But in Vietnam we can help every day, every hour. It's a place where we can make a difference."

The South East Asia Relief Foundation already has received recognition from the state as a non-profit organization and has applied to the Internal Revenue Service for charitable-organization status. Bruce Burns, an attorney from San Jose, Calif., serves as vice president.

To donate or for more information write to the foundation at P.O. Box 863, Poulsbo, Wash.

**GẶP GỖ CÁC THÀNH VIÊN CỦA HIỆP HỘI CỨU TRỢ ĐÔNG NAM Á
(SOUTH EAST ASIA RELIEF FOUNDATION)**

“CHUYỀN ĐI NÀY LÀ TRỞ VỀ NHÀ”



Ông Rogers và bà Jeanne

Cuối tháng 11-90, trên khoảng đường Đồng Khởi, Lê Lợi, người ta hay bắt gặp một đoàn khách hươc ngoài, trong đó có một phụ nữ to lớn, tóc bạc phơ, dịu dàng ôm những đứa trẻ trên đường phố. Và, thật bất ngờ, bà thường rút ra những món đồ chơi nhỏ nhỏ đựng trong hộp phim để tặng các em. Có khi chỉ là một viên bi sặc



Hai ông bà Benson

sỡ, hoặc chiếc thuyền buồm bé tẻo tẻo mà bà đã chuẩn bị sẵn từ bên Mỹ. Trẻ em thân mật gọi bà là “Bà ngoại” hay Mama Jeanne. Bà Jeanne đã 59 tuổi, y tá về hưu, đã từng tham gia các hoạt động cứu trợ ở Acmeiria, Trencobum (Liên Xô) và ở Trung Phi. Lần này bà sang Việt Nam là lần thứ hai. Còn ba người kia? Đó là ông Dan Rogers, chủ tịch Hiệp hội Cứu trợ Đông Nam Á, vợ chồng ông Don Benson, thư ký điều hành. Cả hai ông Rogers và Benson đều là cựu chiến binh đã từng tham chiến ở Việt Nam từ 1968 đến 1972. Vợ ông Don Benson là người Việt Nam quê ở Long Xuyên: bà Linh Benson.

Chiều tối ngày 4-12, tại khách sạn Bông Hồng, phóng viên Tuổi Trẻ Chủ Nhật đã gặp và trao đổi với các thành viên trong đoàn. Câu chuyện bị ngắt quãng liên tục bởi còi xe cứu hỏa đang cứu chữa đám cháy lớn ở khách sạn bên cạnh. Ông Don Benson cho biết:

Don Benson: Tôi đã ở VN năm năm. Vợ tôi là người VN và chúng tôi cũng đã sinh ra những đứa con ở VN. Khi tôi trở về Mỹ năm 1972, một trong những đứa con tôi phải ở lại với ông bà ngoại. Năm 1988, tôi trở lại đây cùng luật sư Bruce Burns với mục đích làm thê nào để những đứa con lại như con tôi được đoàn tụ với gia đình. Qua chuyến đi đến nhiều địa phương ở VN, thăm các bệnh viện, trại mồ côi, chúng tôi hiểu ra rằng không phải chỉ có trẻ lại mà còn nhiều trẻ em VN khác đang cần

sự giúp đỡ. Từ lúc đó, chúng tôi suy nghĩ những gì cần phải làm. Cứu một đứa trẻ là cứu cả một cuộc đời. Trẻ em ở mỗi quốc gia là tương lai chung. Chúng ta cần phải giúp đỡ và hướng về tương lai dù sống ở nước nào.

● Trong điều kiện VN và Mỹ chưa có bang giao chính thức, hoạt động của Hiệp hội có trở ngại gì từ hai phía?

Dan Rogers: Hiệp hội Cứu trợ Đông Nam Á là một tổ chức phi chính phủ. Chúng tôi hoạt động với tư cách cá nhân, tất cả mọi chi phí của chuyến đi chúng tôi tự lo. Nói chung, chúng tôi không gặp trở ngại nào cả.

● Ngày 29-10-90, tám nghị sĩ thuộc hai đảng Cộng hòa và Dân chủ đã viết thư gửi

Tổng thống Mỹ Bush yêu cầu bỏ ngay chính sách cấm vận đối với VN. Các ông bà có suy nghĩ gì về vấn đề này?

Dan Rogers: Chúng tôi đến VN với tư cách là nhân dân đến với nhân dân (cười). Không có vấn đề chính trị giữa nhân dân.

Don Benson: Chúng tôi không đồng tình với lệnh cấm vận của chính phủ Mỹ. Việc lập lại quan hệ giữa hai nước là cần thiết và càng sớm càng tốt.

● Hiệp hội sẽ hoạt động ra sao trong những ngày sắp tới?

Don Benson: Đây là chuyến hàng đầu tiên đến VN. Chúng tôi đã đến thăm và giúp đỡ một số dụng cụ y tế, thuốc chữa bệnh, tài liệu y khoa và đồ chơi cho các bệnh viện, trại mồ côi ở An Giang, Đồng Nai, Hậu Giang, Vũng Tàu - Côn Đảo và ở Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh. Số lượng hàng viện trợ chưa nhiều, khoảng hơn 100.000 đôla. Hi vọng trong thời gian sắp tới, chúng tôi sẽ có mặt ở Hà Nội, Quảng Nam - Đà Nẵng... Đặc biệt khi hai nước có quan hệ chính thức, các hoạt động của Hiệp hội sẽ được đẩy mạnh hơn.

● Ông Don Benson nói rằng, trái tim của ông ấy thuộc về Long Xuyên quê vợ của mình. Còn ông Dan Rogers?

Dan Rogers: Tôi đã đánh rơi mất trái tim mình ở VN vì một cô gái VN ngay lần trở lại đầu tiên từ năm 1969 (cười). Tôi phải về VN và có vợ VN. Đối với chúng tôi, chuyến đi này là trở về nhà.

THÈ HÙNG - QUANG HIẾN thực hiện

This was an interview done in Saigon Dec 1990