



JOURNEY TO FORGIVENESS

Namaya is a Vietnam-era U.S. Navy veteran, a poet and an artist. Though far from combat, the war always haunted his memory and inspired him to be a lifelong peace activist. The following is his essay *Vietnam: A Journey to Forgiveness: Legacy of Agent Orange*.

“In Vietnamese, they say, ‘Making Peace is a treasure’: *Đĩ hoà vi quý*.”

I searched for this gift during a two-month journey from Ho Chi Minh City to Hanoi in early 2020, and to Laos, before COVID shook the world. I came to Vietnam for a writing and art residency on the impact of the war and forgiveness. My primary challenge was to set aside all my assumptions. Landing at the modern airport in Ho Chi Minh City, I quickly realized there had been a seismic change in this country over the past fifty years. Though this country is rooted in its rich cultural legacy, it is also a young, vibrant nation on the move, with most people under thirty.

Despite the modernity, I saw the legacy of the war: the site of the My Lai massacre, the war museums with the preserved fetuses of the Agent Orange victims, the programs to locate UXOs (unexploded bombs), and the orphanages and vocational schools that care for the children and young adults with Agent Orange. I was wonder-struck by the magnificent vistas from the Mekong Delta, the shimmering green rice fields, Marble Mountain, the serene Ba Nang mountains, and the two thousand miles of coastline. However, the greatest treasure of this land is the extraordinarily kind,



Namaya: veteran, poet and artist.

resilient, and welcoming people. It was a great joy to see all the children, from tots to teens playing everywhere, and all the handsome young men and women! I kept asking myself: Why did we (Americans) want to destroy this country and these people?

The Agent Orange/dioxin poison remains. The US military sprayed the toxic pesticide throughout the country from 1962-1971, knowing it was toxic to people and the ecosystem. A common fallacy is the Americans were trying to remove the "jungle" foliage and that the herbicide was benign. No, the US intentionally tried to destroy the forests, ecosystem, and farms to force villagers to move to the cities. Agent Orange has affected twenty to twenty-five percent of the land of southern Vietnam, along the length of Laos, and into Cambodia. Even fifty years after the war, children are born with congenital disabilities, and many victims receive no support or compensation. We visited schools and vocational centers like Friendship Village, founded by George Mizo, an

American veteran. I played music, spoke with the young adults at the center, and was grateful to see how these people, even with significant disabilities, had so much joy despite their limitations. There is a need for a hundred or more centers like this throughout the country.

People need to know the epic struggle of the Vietnamese in their courageous fight for freedom against almost insurmountable odds; this strength and courage is a core part of the Vietnamese identity. The United States had undermined the independence movement since the 1940s. During WWII, the Viet Minh, under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh, aided the US and Allied troops against the Japanese occupation.

The French Vichy had collaborated with the Japanese during the war, but the Viet Minh bravely fought against the occupation and supported the allies. Nevertheless, the USA reneged on its promise of freedom, rejected Vietnam's independence, and became mired in an unwinnable war. France, which had occupied Vietnam for one hundred years, was re-armed by the Americans until soundly defeated in 1954 at Dien Bien Phu. This victory led to the eventual collapse of all French colonies. With typical American hubris, the US military refused to accept the Vietnamese victory and continued the war until their defeat in 1973. The Vietnamese struggle for freedom was like David versus Goliath; though they were supported by the Chinese and the Russians, it was the North Vietnamese's grit, courage, and resilience that won the war. The numerous Rambo and

other American war movies are a pathetic farce and negate the truth of this war.

The South Vietnamese government was a corrupt legacy of the French occupation and a puppet of the USA. President Diem was so corrupt the CIA had him assassinated. The Buddhist monk Thich Quang Duc immolated himself protesting the war in downtown Saigon on June 11, 1963. His profound sacrifice embodied the courage of the Vietnamese people.

In this monumental folly, 58,200 American soldiers were killed and over 150,000 wounded. America's loss, though tragic, pales to the Vietnamese losses: more than two million Vietnamese were killed, a country devastated by decades of war, and millions of people still affected by Agent Orange. The most poignant moment for me was meeting North Vietnamese veterans; even knowing I was a US Navy veteran, there wasn't any palpable bitterness. Every family in Vietnam has a grandparent, uncle, or relative who was killed in the war. I am humbled by the Vietnamese's courage, sacrifice, and willingness to forgive.

Veterans like Chuck Searcy have worked in Vietnam for twenty years with Agent Orange remediation and removing UXOs (unexploded ordnances). Through the persistent advocacy of Senator Leahy, the USA is helping to clean up *some* of the most contaminated "hot-spots" sites of Agent Orange. Nevertheless, it is only a fraction of the aid needed.

This poison affects all the places it was handled and stored: Vietnam, Japan, Okinawa, US military bases, the Philippines, and more. To make peace with our past, we must remediate the damage we have done, and those actions are the first steps to forgiveness. The work of cleaning up Agent Orange and removing unexploded ordnances must also occur in Laos and Cambodia.

We cannot ignore *our responsibility* for the war: the destruction of vast forests and ecosystems, cultural and historical treasures that have been lost, and this land shattered by bombs and poisoned by herbicides. The Vietnamese, Laotian, and Cambodian governments urgently need financial assistance for landmine removal and Agent Orange remediation. One step in the reconciliation process is the bill sponsored by Congresswoman Barbara Lee, which seeks to support the more



Agent Orange: Do Not Forget Me

A B4 Peace project by the artist Namaya and the B4 Peace team. The project's goal is to increase knowledge regarding the ongoing environmental and human cost of the US military's chemical defoliant Agent Orange during the Vietnam War. The sculpture depicts barrels of Agent Orange, displaying the faces of their victims. It is hoped that this sculpture will be displayed at the War Remnants Museum in Ho Chi Minh City.

than two million Vietnamese victims but was stalled in Congress.

A Vietnamese war veteran once said, "It took us a thousand years to get rid of the Chinese, one hundred years to get rid of the French, but only a decade to defeat the Americans. So it's easier to forgive the Americans."

In my journey from Ho Chi Minh City to Hanoi, I gained much respect and admiration for these enormously vibrant, hard-working people. It is a culture of welcome and filled with smiles. My attempts to speak Vietnamese were appreciated; fortunately, English is widely spoken. Wherever we went, people were eager to chat and help us. Crossing the streets was always difficult in Hanoi or any city. In one instance, a young teenage boy and girl took us by the

hand and, like school children, walked us across a busy street in Hanoi.

Come to Vietnam after COVID has passed and discover this extraordinary country with a beginner's mind. When you visit, wander beyond the usual tourist sanctuaries of Hoi An, Dalat, and Sun World, and get to know the people.

In our ongoing journeys to Vietnam, we continue to support the process of forgiveness and reconciliation. We will return to Vietnam, and we continue our work with those affected by Agent Orange. We cannot wait to reconnect with friends and delight in the delicious food and welcoming hospitality. Truly, peace is the treasure, *Đĩ hoà vì quý.*

Namaya
August 2022

MSAVLC AND AGENT ORANGE VICTIMS

Ever since the tragedy of Agent Orange, MSAVLC has been providing aid to the victims affected in Vietnam. Help was given to victims as part of the 'Mother and Child' Project in the 1980's. In the 1990's equipment was given to the Friendship Village established by George Mizo, and to the Morning Star Centre for Handicapped Children in Hanoi.

More recently MSAVLC has provided funds and equipment for Thanh Xuan Peace Village in Hanoi and Hoa Binh Peace Village in Ho Chi Minh City. Both provide residential care and education for children affected by Agent Orange. In the past five years our charity has provided 2,000 wheelchairs to first, second and third generation victims of Agent Orange/dioxin used by US forces during the Vietnam War.

There are reportedly three million victims in Vietnam. The fight for justice for them continues...

ALL EARS CAMBODIA: MUSIC THERAPY

MSAVLC has recently funded a new project to provide music therapy for Khmer children with irreversible severe hearing loss. It involves staff training and the use of music therapy to improve cognitive and language development, psychological well-being and the development of speech and auditory skills.

a community. Exposure to the beat in music, such as drums, can improve the emotional and social quality-of-life of hearing-aid users. Music can refine the sense of rhythm, benefitting the perception of speech and can also boost feelings of enjoyment.

The project is based in Phnom Penh, and with support from

skills, auditory training and music therapy for social skills development in children.

Four staff members are currently receiving training. The work being done within the music therapy project is clearly very new and experimental to the team. Still, paediatric audiology



Learning to sing and play rhythms and melodies on instruments helps discriminate differences in these musical elements that can then be translated to elements of speech. Musical activity, such as playing an instrument, requires the same brain processes that are required for performing sorting activities and spatial-temporal reasoning, and exposure to music should be encouraged especially in young children. Learning to distinguish differences in music tones, children can practice the diverse pitch and intonation found in their own speaking voices.

Participation in music activities can positively impact children's emotional needs – the feelings they have about themselves and their roles in various settings. Music participation can help build a child's confidence by providing the opportunity of creative expression and exploration in a music environment. Group participation in music activities helps children to feel a part of

MSAVLC, a large range of suitable musical instruments have begun to be assembled for use in this project. These are early days as the project is very new, but progress is being made. Instruments acquired so far include guitars, glockenspiel, tambourine, ukulele, tabla drums and xylophone. The project also involves staff training through the All Ears' in-house training programme. The training covers the common music therapy goals and interventions, methodology, goals related to language and speech development, improving listening

continues to diversify, and the quality of service improves. The children (minimally with moderate-to bilateral severe sensorineural hearing loss) who are being exposed to this fledgling project appear to be enthusiastic and, although sometimes needing a little encouragement, seem to readily engage and interact with others, their peers and facilitators. In time, it is hoped that this will lead to distinctive positive behaviour - before, during and after sessions and beyond the realms of the programme. And, although the project is still at a very early stage, it is hoped that children with prelingual hearing loss will demonstrate improvement in communication and the skills to communicate, even if by small steps, and that in time, there will be marked progress in listening skills and the acquiring of speech.

*Glyn Vaughan
Director All Ears Cambodia*

The Trustees of MSAVLC wish All Ears Cambodia every success with this exciting new programme.



MONITORING AND EVALUATION

At the end of February Mary Lidgard, Honorary Secretary, and I are due to embark upon a 28-day Monitoring and Evaluation visit to Vietnam and Cambodia.

The trip is long overdue, with planned visits in 2017 and 2020 being cancelled due to illness and then by the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. At last, it is safe to travel, and we are eagerly anticipating visiting all our current projects and meeting up again with our project directors, many of whom we have not seen for eight years.

The major purposes of all the project visits are:

To discuss with directors, the projects which we have funded recently and proposals for future project funding.

To view and check any equipment which has been purchased recently using MSAVLC funds.

To meet patients and clients who have benefited from the aid sent by the charity.

To check records of transactions, receipts and maintenance protocols.

To obtain verbal or written reports and photographs, so that we are able to report back to the Trustees, our supporters and donors.

Our plan is to fly from London to Ho Chi Minh City where we will

visit Hoa Binh Peace Village in Tu Du Hospital to meet the staff and children there, all of whom are victims of Agent Orange. We also plan to re-visit the War Remnants Museum. We travel on to Phnom Penh where we will meet with Ruth Elliot, Director of Daughters of Cambodia along with some of her staff and clients. We will also meet up with Glyn Vaughan, Founder/Director of All Ears Cambodia and his staff, to evaluate the projects that we have funded there.

From Phnom Penh we travel on to Pursat, home of the Disability Development Services Program and its Director, Pheng Samnang. We hope to go with him to meet some of DDSP's clients. Then it's on to Poipet in western Cambodia to meet Cheng Rostitus and the children at New Hope Children's Home. From Poipet we travel to Siem Reap to visit All Ears Cambodia's outreach project which is based there.

We then fly back to Vietnam, to Hanoi, to meet with officials from the Vietnam Union of Friendship Organisations (VUFO) and the People's Aid Co-ordinating Committee (PACCOM). Finally, we hope to visit the headquarters of the Vietnam Association for the Victims of Agent Orange/Dioxin (VAVA) and meet some of the recipients of the 2,000 wheelchairs supplied by

MSAVLC.

Reports and pictures of all our meetings will appear in future editions of the Bulletin.

*Peter Lidgard
Chair of Trustees*

HAPPY NEW YEAR

New Year celebrations take place at different times in south-east Asia.

The new moon on the 22nd January signalled Tet in Vietnam, prompting week-long celebrations for the Year of the Cat. However, in Cambodia and Laos, New Year is not celebrated until the 14th of April.

CONSTANCE (CONNIE) NGUYEN-XUAN

It is with deep regret that we have to announce the news that Constance (Connie) Nguyen-Xuan has recently deceased, aged 94.

Connie was a great character, a peace activist and an enthusiastic supporter of MSAVLC.

A full obituary will be published in the May edition of the Bulletin.

DATA PROTECTION

MSAVLC is committed to making sure that our communications with you are secure, considered and welcomed. We promise to respect any personal data that you share with us, we will keep it safe, and we will not share it with third parties.

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A note for your diary:

MEDICAL AND SCIENTIFIC AID FOR VIETNAM, LAOS AND CAMBODIA

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The charity's Annual General Meeting will be held at

Charlton Kings Social Club
Church Street, Charlton Kings,
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on Saturday 17th June at 2.00 pm.

Refreshments will be available.

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