

I WENT TO VIETNAM WITH MY DAD

The story of a California boy and his Far-Away-Family in Vietnam

California, March, 2000

Sean Little picks up his silver Razor and scooters out of the garage in search of his neighborhood buddies. It's a typical Southern California spring morning, not long before the Easter break. The 7-year attends Rielly elementary school, where he's doing well in the First grade and has learned to read. It's a good thing. His dad has told him about the "BOOK."

In two weeks, Sean will be on an airplane bound for Vietnam, the longest trip of his short life. Because he's heard so much about Vietnam from his father, Sean has been waiting for this moment for a long time. His teacher and friends know about the trip, and are very excited for him. His grandparents have given him a Saint Christopher medal to keep him safe. His bags are packed, stowed away in the garage, filled with medicines and cereal, peanut butter and canned pasta. Candy treats and chewing gum fill every secret pocket in his backpack.

He is finally going to meet his far-away-family.

Because of the lengthy plane ride, every distraction known to man will be taken aboard the plane to help the boy survive 17 hours of sitting. The in-flight movies will surely help kill time, but the uncharted waters have his parents slightly concerned.

Sean's dad is Mike Little, a gray-haired man in his mid-50's. Marion, his mother, is much younger. Since their destination is so remote and foreign, they have tried to take every possible precaution for Sean's safety and well being. Hauling all that food won't be easy, but it's the only way mom will let her son go.

Although Mike and Marion have been to Vietnam a number of times during the 1990's, this will be the first time they take Sean, their only son. It scares them somewhat, especially the possibility of his getting sick, but they feel the good outweighs the bad. It's always been a dream to bring Sean along. In fact, the far-away-family has "demanded" just that, and would be so disappointed if he was left behind. From pictures, they feel like they already know Sean, whom they call "little brother."

Marion oversees everything. She knows her husband well and understands the importance of this trip...for him and for the far-away-family. She also realizes that this visit to a different culture in a distant land may change her son forever; or, at the very least, it

will leave him with the memory of a lifetime. It just might be the beginning of a relationship for Sean that began 32 years ago for her husband. Mike was then a 21-year old soldier in Vietnam, who went to war alone, but came home a father. This trip could be the bridge that connects family past to family future.

Back At The Beginning, Vietnam, 1968

The Military Police were assigned a number of roles in the Vietnam War, but the unit Mike joined was one he'd never heard of before, the Roadrunners of B Company, 504th MP Battalion, stationed in the Central Highland town of Pleiku. Like men before him, Mike learned survival lessons from the veterans he served beside. Being a "combat MP" was something new to him, as it was for everyone at first.

The Roadrunner mission was pretty straightforward. Key arteries, from coastal docks to Highland military bases, kept the war supplies flowing, but that re-supply needed help. Besides the armor units placed at tactical strong points, that meant MP's patrolling all the key roads in armor-plated gun jeeps or V-100 armored cars. They were vital in keeping the roads open for the endless military truck convoys, as well as coordinating civilian traffic.

It was dangerous work. Roadrunners were tasked with the patrol of two notorious stretches of road. One was highway 14, which ran from Pleiku to Kontum, and beyond to Dak To. The second was the more infamous highway 19, an east-west road that stretched all the way from Pleiku to Qui Nhon on the coast. B Company patrols roamed over highway 19 and its ominous Mang Yang Pass, where the French had suffered a huge defeat in 1954. Land mines, snipers, and ambushes were common, which created a strong bond between truckers, tankers and Roadrunners.

Unlike the typical town patrol MP's, the men on the roads carried themselves with a certain swagger and boldness, which was reflected in the patch they wore. Custom-made by Warner Brothers, it depicted the popular cartoon hero, the Roadrunner. They were extremely proud to wear it on their flak jackets.

Each day, Roadrunners stationed patrols near the Ayun River, where it met highway 19, to direct traffic over a temporary, one-lane bridge. The original bridge had been blown up by the enemy in 1967. This checkpoint was often a gathering point for the Roadrunner patrols, a place to share c-rations, take a break and wait for the next convoy. It was also a place for the local children to wait, at a distance, hoping that the soldiers would give away their leftover food. They often did.

These children were called Montagnards, the indigenous people living in the remote, mountainous Highlands. None of the Roadrunners knew of these people prior to the war, but stories from veterans soon educated them, and they learned to respect the different looking people wearing loin cloths. The "Yards" (a respectful slang term) were highly valued by the Americans as loyal and fierce fighters. For Mike and the men of B Company, their daily experience evolved around dozens of quiet, polite and ever-smiling children.

Despite the inherent dangers along highway 19, it was here, at the key checkpoint over the Ayun River, that the “family” emerged. Over time, Mike and some of his buddies became close friends with the children who waited patiently all day for food. It was completely unexpected and unplanned. It just happened...and it just happened to change his life forever.

During the last four months of his tour, Mike pursued the new relationship each day, made easier when he was promoted to Roadrunner 1, leading all the patrols on highway 19. Subconsciously, he “quit” the war, and replaced it with a new focus and reason to get out of bed each morning. He and the Montagnard children adopted each other in spirit. They became known as “Mike’s kids.” The war around them, with its death and destruction, didn’t stop; however, they found ways to work around it.

In a world of numerous limitations, they shared as much as they could. There were afternoon swims in the Ayun River, c-ration meals, jeep rides, even target shooting with M-16’s. Mike tried desperately to learn the language of the Bahnar, which was the Montagnard tribal dialect spoken by the kids. Using confiscated wood, Roadrunners even built a house for a very poor family, whose father had died of starvation. However, what really brought the family closer together were the visits to the American camp in Pleiku. It was there that “miracles” happened, modern marvels never before dreamed of.

Even the Vietnamese town of Pleiku was totally foreign to the kids, since their village was a good 40 miles away. Since they had never seen a town, Pleiku dazzled them, while most westerners agreed it was a pit compared to places back home.

Hot food, knives and forks, hot water showers, beds, electric lights, toilets...all of these experiences were new and wonderful, but one miracle stood out from the rest. A small, lone television set held them transfixed, mattering not that they understood no English. In the morning, the kids nearly had to be dragged from the hooch.

Mike began a clothing drive (the true beginning of Operation Rice Lift), writing his parents to send clothes for his kids. Soon, other Roadrunners followed suit, and box after box of used clothing found their way into the village. The old chief would hand out everything to avoid any jealousy or unfairness. At the time, it was believed that they were the best dressed Yards in Vietnam.

When Mike’s tour was up, he was filled with mixed emotions. He had survived the year without a scratch, losing 30 pounds, but something unforeseen had happened to him. He’d become the “father” to a band of small, wonderful children, who could not understand why he was leaving them. They had generously presented Mike with silver bracelets and beaded necklaces. Subconsciously, they had given him much more, his humanity.

Like everyone else subjected to war, Mike had witnessed the best and the worst from human beings during his tour, himself included. Often he had questioned his own motives and actions, realizing that he had “changed” in some fundamental way. With his children, he had been the best person he could be, and he hoped this would be enough to offset the other side. As soon as he stepped onto the plane, he missed them.

Among the souvenirs he brought home, Mike kept the brown helmet cover on which he wrote the names of each child. Their ages ranged from 3 to 10, old enough to be away from mother, young enough to stay out of rice and battle fields. Kenh and Prot, 7-year old boys, were Mike's favorite sons, but there were others like Kil and Kun, Piet and Her, Djuk and Djanh, Grok and Blup. The girls were shy and never spent the night at camp, but their smiles were radiant. They had names like Bler, Ben, and Koch.

Roadrunners helped Mike keep contact with the kids by mail. They would take his letters and pictures to the village and read the words to the assembled children. He also continued to send boxes of clothing. Out of the Army, he even tried to land a job with a civilian aid or religious group operating in Vietnam, but no one was willing to hire an untrained veteran. Finally, by the end of 1968, there were no more Roadrunners left in Pleiku to carry on for him.

The war continued, but Mike had no word from his far-away-family. It was an absence like a dark quiet room...you know they're there, but you can't see them. There was absolutely no way to stay in touch or reach them. With the end of the war in 1975 and the Communist takeover, it seemed as if he never would again.

Miracle in the Highlands, March, 1994

From the end of the War until 1994, the Central Highlands remained off limits to foreign tourists and Americans. The area was still considered sensitive, partly because of unrest between Montagnards and the ever-increasing Vietnamese population. The Highlands were included in Hanoi's vision to create economic zones in sparsely populated areas, where ethnic Vietnamese would relocate to create new enterprises. It didn't take long for the Montagnards to become minorities in their own land.

Then, with the end of the U.S. Embargo, the Highlands were opened to the outside world. When Mike learned that Pleiku and surrounding areas had become accessible after all this time, he immediately called a close friend and former Roadrunner to join him in going back. Together, they set off in March to find the children.

Relying on 26-year old photographs, the two men found that miracles can happen. An elderly Vietnamese man who lived along highway 19, near the Ayun River, recognized the kids in the faded pictures. A little more detective work was left, but two days later, the miracle reunion finally took place in the overcrowded hut of one of Mike's children.

The brothers, Kenh and Kun, were there; tears of joy fell in puddles on the earthen floor. Prot was the last one to throw his arms around Mike, and was soon singing the songs they had learned together a quarter century earlier. To Mike's surprise and joy, the children-turned-adults had remembered everything from the past, and had nourished the same fond memories.

The news wasn't all good. It was sad to learn that some of the children had already perished, including Kil, Djanh and Blup. Montagnard life expectancy is short in that part of

the world. However, those that remained were now married, with families of their own. Mike shared pictures of his family in America, of his wife and baby boy, Sean, who was not even two years old at the time.

The reunion lasted a few short hours, but like he had done in 1968, Mike promised to come back again. On the long plane ride home, he wondered what the future now held for this uncommon family. Never expecting to actually find them, he hadn't really thought about what the consequence would be. It was a question for which he had no answer, yet.

Discovery and Loss

Sometimes one gets more than he asks for. Had his Montagnard family stayed in the past, Mike's memories would have remained intact, undisturbed and incapable of tragedy. No longer was there a dream of "one day finding them;" that day had already come. The family, no matter how distant, was alive and eager to regain their father's attention and love.

With his wife fully supportive, Mike vowed to do whatever it took to be a positive influence in the lives of his far-away-family. They soon learned that basic survival, food and medicine, was a critical concern...so they began saving for it.

It was absolutely necessary to learn as much as possible about the family's culture and way of life to avoid misunderstandings. This turned out to be so true when it came to money. Luckily, there were two uncles (former translators during the War) who stepped forward to become the vital communication link. Collect phone calls became a monthly occurrence, as the families on both sides of the world learned more and more about each other.

Then, in 1995, Prot passed away from unknown causes. He was survived by his wife and five children. Mike was devastated when he got the call. At least he had been able to see his favorite son the previous year, and express his love to him. Mike and Marion went to Vietnam in 1996, and grieved at Prot's gravesite with his widow and children. It was Marion's first visit to the jungle village where her husband's family lived. She fell under Vietnam's spell and immediately became "mother" to her own far-away-family.

A second call came in 1997. Another son, Kenh, had passed away in his sleep. Like Prot, he was in his mid-thirties at the time, and also left a wife and many young children. Besides being devastated by these losses, Mike was also very frustrated since he felt helpless to do anything that might make a difference. His son, Sean, was 5-years old at the time, and saw his dad cry at the kitchen table.

Again, Mike and Marion went back to Vietnam to pay respects for a lost son. It was 1998, and without intervention from Ambassador Pete Peterson, the visit would not have happened. Local Vietnamese authorities had become "nervous" by their close relationship with the Montagnards, and visas were denied. An official reason was never given, but it became obvious that special care had to be taken during this, or any subsequent visit, to assure access to Vietnam. The Little's movements, particularly in the villages, were

closely monitored, but that was actually welcomed. It was much more important for the police to know everything that went on so suspicion wouldn't be cast upon the Montagnard family.

Sean's Big Adventure Continues, April, 2000

It's 1:30 in the morning, Saturday, April 15th. The EVA flight out of Los Angeles will take 17 hours to reach Ho Chi Minh City. Sean and his parents sleep for the first few hours, miss a meal and a movie, then settle in and find ways to occupy themselves on the seemingly endless journey.

"They don't speak English here!" exclaims Sean, after spending his first day in Vietnam. In his mind, it had never occurred to him that Vietnam was any different from home. The money is also different, and soon he is exchanging U.S. currency for piles of Dong. He really likes the thick wad of bills. Everyone at the hotel is so nice to him, pinching his cheeks whenever possible. The young waiters hover around the little boy, attending to his needs.

The City is noisy and so crowded with motorbikes. Red banners are everywhere, as the country prepares for the 25-year anniversary of the end of the Vietnam War. It doesn't make much of an impression on Sean. He loves going to the market and buying T-shirts. More ladies pinch his cheeks. Mother and father stay close by, but it is obvious that their son is a welcome oddity. Everyone smiles when they see the boy. Many guess that he is American.

A few days later, Sean is in the Highland town of Pleiku, climbing into a rented van, complete with guide and Vietnamese driver. The guide is a friend of Mike's, named Siu Cham, a Jarai Montagnard who works for the government travel agency. Excitement is expressed on everyone's face. It will take an hour to reach the village where the far-away-family is waiting. Mike helps the driver put the heavy duffel bags, filled with gifts for the family, into the back of the van.

When the van comes into view, the Montagnard villagers converge to welcome their parents and brother, Sean. Everyone receives a hug, and then another. Over 100 men, women and children joyously greet them as if time had stood still. Language is not a problem, as the uncles are present to help translate.

Sean's bodyguards were picked in advance. They are teenage boys who will act as his protectors during the days in the village, and it is apparent that Sean will never be out of their sight. Mike figured that he couldn't keep an eye on the adventuresome boy all the time, so he devised the bodyguard plan. Nobody warned them about Sean! He wins their hearts, but wears them out.

When you ask Sean about his trip to Vietnam, he might tell you about riding the elephant, going to Easter Mass with 10,000 Montagnards at night time, or about running away from the big-assed bugs. But most likely, he'll talk about swimming in the Ayun River with all

the kids, or playing soccer with the boys, or riding on the back of a motorbike for the first time. In any event, his senses stayed on overload. He wasn't fond of the food.

It's hoped that Sean will lead this family one day and for years to come, especially after his father is gone. This visit is the first step, and they hope there will be many more in the years ahead. Sean loves his far-away-family too.

The last day in-country comes too soon, and the families prepare to part. As if in a dream, they must awaken to reality. Mike uses a wet rag to wipe at his tears, as each family member says goodbye to him. Marion is doing the same thing. Sean takes his last ride on the motorbike, with bodyguard, Kui, driving. Later in the van, he finally breaks down and weeps, realizing that he wasn't coming back in the morning.

Upon returning home to California (or "re-entry" as Marion puts it), the rolls of film are taken in for developing. That's the most important thing, even before unpacking and reading the mail. It is the best way to cure a sad heart, seeing the smiles again in pictures. Extra sets are made, one for Sean and one for the far-away-family. Sean has a special photo album.

The trip isn't over, however. There is unfinished business ahead, called the "Book." Throughout the trip, Sean and his dad have taken meticulous notes, and now it's time to begin the collaboration. They go right to work and spend many nights going over every detail. Sean has final say on each word. Lots of pictures compliment the text.

"I wrote the Book because dad made me," Sean admits, "but it was kind of fun anyways." He plans on giving a copy to his First Grade teacher, Mrs. Hepner, because she taught him how to read. He also hopes that the Book gets published, because he wants to buy rice for his far-away-family.

The Book has a title: **I WENT TO VIETNAM WITH DADDY (and Mommy too)**. It's bound in a red cover, much like the dirt in the Central Highlands. Sean takes it with him to church on Sundays and reads it like a bible. Every page is a fresh memory. His far-away-family isn't so far afterall.

THE END

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