

## The Orphanage in the Jungle: a perspective of Viet Nam

I haven't told this story for a long time. Let's see how good my memory is.



It is now Summer – 1964; I am twenty-two years old. I'm 5'7", I weigh one hundred and twenty-five pounds soaking wet and my hair's cropped to within a half inch of my skull. The jungle sun has tanned my lean face, making my Roman nose most prominent, and the Innocence of Youth is my mistress. Never did I realize that I had a mistress then or that she had wrapped herself around me to protect me from the evils of the world. In fact, I hadn't a

vague notion of what these worldly evils might be that she was shielding me from, or why I needed to be protected at all. I knew no fear; I was invincible, wasn't I? My name is Bob Magnant, Lieutenant Magnant to those around me, and I'm trying on the world for size for the first time in my life. Maybe I was already too close to the trees. At the time, I had no idea who it was that had appointed Mistress Innocence to be my protector. Looking back, I'm sure that my Mom had some-thing to do with my early preparation and that my Catholic high school's rules of 'sex, life and love for teenagers' were a definite factor.

Upon my arrival in Saigon - during Christmas Week of 1963 - I saw myself as a young adventurer, half way around the globe. Madam Nhu, the widow of Viet Nam's recently slain president, had referred to us as 'soldiers of fortune.' My awareness of APO 143 – an Army Post Office designation for the Republic of Viet Nam – was zilch; the war there meant absolutely nothing to me.

Actually, I had just graduated from a New England college with a kid from Thailand and his folk's home was in downtown Bangkok, which was for all intents and purposes just around the corner, a few hours by air to the West.



I'm not quite sure what the term 'war' did mean to this soldier of fortune some thirty-five years ago. Father Killion, my old Irish chaplain at St. John's Prep, had once told me that 'you should never attempt to judge past actions with present knowledge'. I just knew that the Rev was right and I had always subscribed to his wisdom. Back in the old days, it was amazing how, with very little effort, you could beg stupidity and transform yourself back into boyhood innocence. Today, television and the Information Age won't let you do that anymore. Hopefully, I've learned a few things about how the world works since then that may put my memories of the Far East into some reasonable frame of reference.

I must admit that looking out the jet's window as we touched down at Tan Son Nhut airport - and glimpsing groups of yellow-skinned soldiers crouched down along the tarmac - momentarily gave me a pounding heart. Dozens upon dozens of dusty soldiers were huddled along both sides of the main runway, apparently waiting to be attacked by some unseen enemy. I was definitely concerned, even though it was just for a moment!

In retrospect, I know that these troops were just trying to protect themselves from the powerful blasts of the 707's engines, as it passed over their heads with a load of fresh faces. Those poor souls were out there, waiting to board helicopters, banana-shaped machines that would take them the few miles from the city's quiet to some unnamed rice paddy. That's where their war was that day - out in the jungle; it's where their enemy, the Viet Cong,

had chosen to fight. The United States, in its wisdom, was 'helping' the soldiers of the South Viet Nam Army as part of an Advisory Campaign. Our men in uniform were teaching the ARVN, as they were called, how to run a Western-style war and to fight and die like John Wayne. The stateside newspapers had said that their conflict would be winding down soon. Headlines had proclaimed that 1000 American soldiers would be home by Christmas. What they had failed to make mention of was the fact that there were new batches of troops, guys like me that were already in the pipeline, making their way toward Southeast Asia to replace the lucky ones returning home.



The only people that were really aware of what was happening in Viet Nam back then were the immediate friends and family. In truth, no one had very much information to go on. The US had been involved in Southeast Asia since the French were expelled in the 1950s and several hundred of our military had already died 'in the service of their country' there. But these casualties had apparently been reported with all the passion of freeway fatalities and very few people noticed. From 1955 to 1962, the American

**headcount in Viet Nam had grown from about 500 to roughly 12,000 troops and now we were in the process of increasing our support across the board; we were Americanizing this war. When I left Viet Nam, in March of 1965, the number of US forces in the country had jumped up to 26,000 and the Advisory Campaign had been named the Defensive Campaign.**

**While this 22-year old was definitely going through a major period of transition in his life, the broader world that he'd come to know seemed to be going through an equally chaotic period. In the closing weeks of 1963, shortly before my landing on this Asian peninsula, the leaders of both nations had been murdered. When I reached Saigon, still referred to as the Paris of the Orient, the country was averaging a coup d'etat a month. The eighteen American generals that were assigned there and their staffs were orchestrating this furtive war from French-flavored hotels and villas throughout the city. Conversely, handfuls of US advisers, young and committed, were scattered across the countryside with their Vietnamese counterparts, slogging through the jungles and paddies, learning about the Eastern mind and the ways of the Orient.**



**We were a component of a regional Pacific Support Group, before that term became synonymous with widows gatherings. I was a seasoned Second Lieutenant with nine weeks of Officer's Basic Orientation, nearly six months time in country and five coups under my belt! My specialty was communications and I felt like the proverbial one-eyed man in the land of the blind. There was one Aviation Battalion and one Signal Battalion in Viet Nam providing support for the advisory teams in the field. My unit was a part of the 39<sup>th</sup> Signal; our mission was to provide for direct commo assistance to advisory folks throughout the country. In addition to military message centers, we operated local telephone exchanges for the advisers and ran the long-distance communications services needed by all of the US forces that were there, such as the helicopter units. We also tried to support the effort in any way we could, especially with any field programs that the advisers were involved in with other agencies. This story is about the people we were trying to help and our support to one such program.**

The Orphanage in the Jungle was truly another world to me. While the memory of it conjures up a unique set of images and impressions, for me it has become representative, and even symbolic, of every other place that I've 'discovered' over the years. But this was my first, my awakening. Time has only made it even more remote from what we typically think of as reality today. I guess that's my question and my conundrum. Maybe it is what the world is really all about? In the end, I guess you'll have to decide for yourself. I may have to fill in some of the details for you with composite memories, but I'll try to keep the spirit of this adventure genuine. At the time, I probably felt like Lord Jim going up the river but, in truth, I hadn't read Conrad's story at that time. Maybe I should just call my story 'The Orphanage'. The phrase 'in the jungle' is a bit superfluous in Southeast Asia; everything is in the jungle. But the term does add intrigue to my title, don't you think? I only visited this orphanage once, but that's all it took to spark my soul and burn an indelible memory of that day into my mind.

What little I know of Viet Nam politics - and it's very little - I've learned in retrospect. The US policy fundamentals of Southeast Asia really weren't a part of my foundation back then. In fact, I was only vaguely aware of the residual French colonialism, although even a green lieutenant could see that the French influence was very much in evidence everywhere. Infused with an overabundance of patriotism, much of it being a direct carryover from Kennedy's slaying, I was off to 'Veet Nam' - as Lyndon Johnson said - to stem the Communist tide and save the Vietnamese from their oppressors. I wanted to keep the dominos from falling; I wanted to protect the peasants from the guerrillas; I wanted to secure the hamlets; I wanted be a hero; I wanted to win the war. I had no idea what the Vietnamese wanted. I don't know if anyone ever asked them.

On a positive note, our American system was attempting to use more than just our military might to win the hearts and minds of our Asian friends. We had a great deal of economic clout, too, and some major aid programs were a part of our diplomatic efforts back then. However, even now, I have no idea of what the total scope was. I do know that the US Overseas Missions [USOM/USAID] did have regional activities when I was there and that improvement to the quality of life of the Vietnamese people was what they were supposed to be about. My first knowledge about the orphanage in the jungle surfaced in conjunction with just such an AID project that an adviser was supporting in our area.

My compound of communicators was situated in the coastal town of Qui Nhon, a small fishing village roughly 300 miles north of Saigon, on the shores of the South China Sea. I had about fifty soldiers assigned with me to provide support for the region. It seems there was some discussion about helping an orphanage approximately one or two hours west of the town. This was out in the heart of VC country, on the main road to the Central Highlands, and the advisers had been working long and hard with these people to make friends and allies for the United States. We always tried our

**best to assist the folks operating in the field; I felt that they had it tough. Actually, my sergeant who ran the mess hall, and looked like Cookie from the Beetle Bailey cartoon, had earned himself quite a reputation with the field as a trader of anything from ice cream to steaks.**

**As in any situation, there are always formal requirements and informal requests for support. This task was definitely in the latter category and was more a request for volunteer help than for any communications service. Our orphanage, as I would learn, was in the middle of nowhere near a village called Duc Pho, or something like that. Their compound was a quiet little community of perhaps 200 children and a handful of adults; we'll call it MayLi for lack of a better name. It was off on its own and self-subsistent for the most part, at least it was before the conflicts. MayLi had previously received an electric generator from USAID' efforts to bring some of the basics of development, like lights and refrigeration, to them. Our task on this day was related to just that, a new refrigerator that AID had recently gotten for them. The problem was that the orphanage wanted to use the refrigerator in a building that was both nursery and infirmary, but it was on the far side of the compound from the generator. Some power cable had already been scrounged from God knows where and now all that was needed was a little bit of muscle and some technical expertise from a couple of my cable guys. It looked like we had ourselves a real mission.**



Sometimes you felt that there couldn't be a real war going in Viet Nam because, back in garrison, it seemed that everybody took weekends off. Consequently, when it came to doing something in your off time, a deviation from the norm was more than welcome. So one sunny Sunday morning, I set out with the area adviser and a couple of my troops in a truck, loaded with power cable and lots of enthusiasm. A trip through the countryside was routine for an adviser, but for those of us who normally stayed pretty close to home, it was quite an exciting experience. The natives in the fields always seemed industrious and happy to me and they waved to us as we passed by. If they didn't, we were told, it wasn't a good sign. Beyond the main towns, the only things that hinted at any form of community or civilization were the roads that the French had built in colonial days and the fact that they still carried a traveler or two. Other than that, the rolling landscape was coated with lush jungle greens and tropic trees, just the way Mother Nature had first created it and always intended it to be. It was truly beautiful.

The pictures in my mind are much better than any camera could take; they don't fade. I can remember a young boy off in a shallow river bed, tugging at a water buffalo that had no intentions of moving; I saw kids offering fresh-cut fruits for sale along the roadside; and the bronzed farmers, toiling in their paddies, never bothering to look up as we passed. Over the years, they'd seen all kinds of soldiers coming and going. Only the colors of their uniforms had changed. We reached our destination in just over two hours, after a relaxing ride through God's country. The next act of our adventure unfolded and the residents of MayLi treated us to a lively reception. I'd had no idea what to expect and I was equally excited to meet them.



Hidden behind the bamboo walls of MayLi were small huts and secret gardens. In its simplicity, it seemed exceptionally pretty and prosperous. Thinking back on it now, it would remind you of a summer camp set in a tropical paradise, one that was staffed with the warmest people you'd ever met. A flock of children and a few of the adults immediately took us under their wings and showed us around the compound. As we walked the grounds, looking at its immaculate cottages, we learned that a French missionary order had originally started the orphanage. However, new members for this mission had been locally recruited and now the order's assimilation by the native populace had obviously been completed. I was shocked to learn that the obvious prosperity that was here was probably the main reason why so many babies, most of them female, were *abandoned* at MayLi's gates. When mothers had unwanted babies they could no longer care for, they dropped them there! I'm told that this is a somewhat common practice among poorer communities worldwide. The children there were of all ages; the older ones were helping with the work and the caring for the young. You could sense the spirit, the love, the family, the oneness; it felt very good.

Two of the adults, in particular, stick in my mind; I'll call them Sister Chin and Sister Bammi. Though slight in stature, Sister Chin was without question the boss. Dressed in a white habit and cassock, her strong features and almond eyes showed her definite Chinese roots. But didn't all Vietnamese have these roots? A fable says that these people were the offspring from the mating of a Chinese princess and a dragon. Who am I to question mythology? In addition to her Chinese-Vietnamese origins, Sister Chin was obviously well educated by her predecessors, with some fluency in English, but she seemed more comfortable in French. Her vision for the orphanage this day was clear; she could now keep her perishable medicines at the nursery where the care giving was often critical. Sister Bammi, also dressed in white, was the nurse/medic who oversaw the community's medical activities and was integral to its health. After we reviewed cable-routing options, we left the experts to do their job and the Sisters invited me for some tea and some light conversation with them. That's when the fun started. This is where Lord Jim stepped off the boat.

It's hard enough to have good conversations when everyone speaks the same language, but three different ones make it even more interesting. Let me explain. Sister Bammi was younger and as different from Sister Chin as I was. Her roots were from the Central Highlands with the Montagnards, or Nungs, as the hill people are called. In contrast to Chin's pale features, Sister Bammi's face was extremely flat and her skin was nearly as black as her eyes. But, oh what eyes; they sparkled with life like a kid in a candy

store. In addition, she wore a pair of silver wire-rimmed glasses that she balanced on the nub of her tiny, flat nose as she peered over them at you. Any picture of her could only be properly captioned with the words "You'll never guess what I'm thinking!" Also, her speech was totally different from Chin's, as if she were from Brooklyn. She was unique.

We engaged in swapping stories for at least the next hour, phrase by phrase. Now, I'd had a smattering of French in high school and I'd picked up a few Vietnamese words from the houseboys and the bar girls in downtown Saigon, not many of which were very useful at this tea. Since Sister Chin's English was pretty good and Sister Bammi spoke only in her Nung dialect, English was often the common thread for our tête-à-tête, but we all picked up quickly on the others' languages and expressions. I guess the thing that amazed me most was that while we appeared to be so different, we seemed to fully understand each other. Maybe the mix of three languages even enhanced the process. We could be talking about politics, orphans or the fighting and, no matter the language, each of us knew the exact thought the other was trying to convey.

All of a sudden, this spell was broken. Sheepishly, one of my guys approached, not wanting to be the bearer of any bad news. The team had run out of wire and they were going to have to return to Qui Nhon to get more. I was glad that they'd already made that decision on their own because, at that particular moment, I had absolutely no interest of going anywhere. It was my Sunday off and I was on a roll. I had ventured to another world, one that I never knew to exist before that day, and I was having one of the best conversations I'd ever had with two very special members of the human race.

After my troops left for Qui Nhon, I poked around the compound a little bit with Chin and Bammi, perusing what had been accomplished thus far and assessing what was still left to be done. We played with some of the kids, too, enjoying the day and the sunshine, but time seemed to move very slowly, like beads of perspiration, and the atmosphere seemed to change and get heavy. Like a dark cloud, uneasiness began to envelop me. I think the Sisters sensed it, too, and at their suggestion, we went back to the dining hut for more tea. Now, it's very important for you to picture these contrasts; one authoritative Oriental nun, one brown mountain medic and one lean, green lieutenant sitting around a cloth-covered table under a thatched roof in the middle of a tropical jungle, sipping hot tea and jabbering in three languages.

I'll try my best to rebuild our dialog; words were occasionally repeated in more than one language before their meanings were obvious. I could never fully convey to you the sheer joy of the exchange, but the crux of it went something like this.

**Sister Bammi:** You look worried; are you worried?

**Lieutenant M:** No. Why, should I be? I feel fine.

**Sister Chin:** I think Sister Bammi is referring to your friends.

**Lieutenant M:** They should be along shortly.

**Sister Bammi:** But it seems that they've been gone an awfully long time.

**Lieutenant M:** Maybe it just seems like a long time.

**Sister Chin:** Actually, it's only been a few hours

**Sister Bammi:** Still, I think you should be worried about them.

**Lieutenant M:** Why? Is there a problem?

**Sister Bammi:** Maybe the Viet Cong stopped them;  
they did see you come here.

I could see Sister Chin fade into the background, assuming more of a referee's role to lend civility to this developing joust between Sister Bammi and myself, only adding a word here and there. The corner of Sister B's mouth curled in an almost imperceptible smile as she circled her prey. I saw the sparkle in her eyes flair as she readied herself for the next volley.

**Sister Bammi:** Aren't you afraid of the Viet Cong?

**Lieutenant M:** I think it's still too early to worry; they'll be along.

**Sister Bammi:** Who? The Viet Cong? They know you're in here, too.

Her smile was a bit more obvious now and her black eyes danced wildly above her wire-rimmed specs. Remember that this entire production was being choreographed in three languages and I was center stage, in the spotlight, making my debut.

**Lieutenant M:** No, I meant my sergeants. I'm not worried about the VC.

**Sister Bammi:** Well, you should be worried. What will you do if your friends don't come back?

**Lieutenant M:** They'll come back. If they don't, I'll just have to stay here!

Now I'm wise to her. She's testing my mettle and enjoying doing so, too. Sister Chin is hanging back, knowingly, not wanting to take a side. This wily mountain girl had hooked herself a live one and now she was reeling him in.

**Sister Bammi:** But you can't stay here! When it gets dark the VC will come into the orphanage, grab you and take you away.

I'm dodging her thrusts nicely now, bobbing and weaving like a prizefighter.

**Lieutenant M:** Oh well then. I guess if my men don't come back within a few more hours, I'll have to catch a motorized cyclo or I'll just walk back to Qui Nhon.

Sister Chin smiled. The communications barriers had totally dissolved and the exchange of ideas seemed quite complete. I appeared to be holding my own with Sister Bammi, at least for the moment, and my linguistic skills seem to be working after all.

**Sister Bammi:** You can't go to Qui Nhon in a cyclo; the VC will stop you!

**Lieutenant M:** Then I'll just have to disguise myself!

**Sister Bammi:** Oh! How will you do that?

**Lieutenant M:** You can lend me one of your habits and I'll dress up as a nun!

Remember now, all the contrasts and the language interplay that is going on as these next few, profound words of Sister Bammi are completely lost on me in the embarrassed laughter of Sister Chin. Totally confused, I turned to look at Sister Chin and asked, "What did she say?" Shyly, Chin looked directly at me and repeated – almost in a whisper:

"She asked - What are you going to do about your nose?"

**I gasped; I was more in awe than without speech and, after I finally gained control of my laughter, all I could do was smile my warmest smile at both of them. Bammi had gotten me! In those few hours, with a few words, those two ladies taught me that people from opposite ends of the earth were really all part of the same family. It's a lesson I never forgot. If you believe that someone, who was raised eating rice on a hillside in an Asian jungle, thinks or feels any differently about life than you or I, or the kid next door that you played with growing up, think again. By showing me their true humanity, these two women made my world both larger and smaller at the same time.**

**I never had to dress in Sister Bammi's clothes. My troops returned to MayLi later that afternoon, the power was connected to the refrigerator in the nursery, and we all returned safely to Qui Nhon and to the challenges of the days that were to follow in Viet Nam. But I took home with me those warm memories of my day at MayLi and of those two sweet nuns, who unselfishly dedicated their lives to making a difference in the world. I only hope that their futures were filled with the same warmth that they shared with me on that afternoon and that, from my story, more people will learn that, even though we may look different and roam on different parts of the planet, we're all brothers and sisters under the skin. I believe that there is no better time than the present to revisit this memory and to reflect on that thought.**

**Bob Magnant  
Jupiter Florida  
[magnant@mac.com](mailto:magnant@mac.com)  
June 1999**