

CHRISTMAS EXPERIENCE by Richard E. Dodson

It took many years after Christmas 1969 to forget some of those Vietnam memories, and to cherish others even to this day almost as if it were yesterday. I had been in-country Vietnam all of one month when Christmas 1969 arrived. I was still pretty fresh from the states and had not fully acclimated to the heat, smells, humidity, or to facing that major holiday without my family. We had been separated before at Christmas due to Med deployments but this one had special meaning because of where I was and the potential danger that existed everywhere.

I was back in Vung Tau for the week after my indoctrination "cruise" and certainly enjoyed that muddy, cold shower at the hooch and some hot USA food at the Army base, not to mention clean clothes. I had been attending almost daily Mass at the local Vietnamese Catholic Church all week And I thought that is where I should be this Christmas eve instead of on the base.

After cleaning up my gear and, of course, cleaning my M-16 and .45, I thought how incongruous can this be...here it was Christmas eve and I was cleaning weapons! Peace on Earth! Good will to men! Right!! Anyway, I borrowed my boss's jeep and set out for church. I asked everyone else around if they wanted to come, the answer was no....they preferred to sit tight and watch another cowboy flick. So, I left the hooch, got in the jeep and drove off. I had gone about a mile (two clicks) down the main road when I saw a bundle of rags by the side of the road. The bundle moved so I stopped to investigate. I got out of my jeep, being careful of where I was and who might be watching and touched the bundle with my toe. I guess that was stupid because it could have been a booby trap, but I hadn't even thought of that possibility. I was still very green. It moved again and started to cry it was a baby and probably not too old. I looked for anyone who might be around that I could give the baby to, but no one was there. What the hell was I going to do with a baby and where the hell was its mother? I just couldn't leave it there. I guess I stood there by the side of the road for about ten minutes looking for someone to help, then decided to move because I/we were a neat target. I got back in the jeep and drove to church carrying that little baby. As I walked into church a Vietnamese nun came up to me and asked me if that were my baby. I said no, I had found it beside the road, and I needed some help. To make this situation even more difficult to comprehend, the nun spoke perfect English. You know, I was beginning to get a very strange feeling about all of this so

I gave the baby to the nun, told her where I lived and my name, said a fast prayer and then left the church.

I got back into the jeep and drove back to our hooch. I told my boss what had happened and he was quite moved by the story. My boss was a super guy, very devote, big family man, and really so clean and pure in thought and deed, he was a great inspiration plus a hell of a fighter. Anyway, he told me that it was not too unusual an occurrence for the very poor or girls out of wedlock to abandon babies they could not afford to keep. The mother was probably hoping that someone far better off than she would take the baby home and raise it as her own. He also said that the nun would have taken the baby to the orphanage in town that they ran and that I could periodically check up on it as time went on. That was my first bit of information about any orphanage. So, the day after Christmas I did find the orphanage and the nun. She gave me a tour, showed me the baby and then told me about their flight from the north ten years before and how they had walked all the way with over a hundred children. They still had over a hundred children of all ages...just as soon as one left because of age, another would arrive. That orphanage was in such disrepair and everyone so needed the basic essentials of living that I decided that I would tell the other advisors about it and try to arrange some way of getting them supplies from the states on a regular basis.

To make a painful story short, we did "sponsor" the orphanage, they did get basic essentials from the states, the baby did prosper, and the nuns got a lot of help from the US Navy.

Now, you can say that it was a coincidence that all that happened, or you can imagine that perhaps, just perhaps, there was a much more powerful force at work there. To be truthful, somedays I believe it was the former and somedays I believe it was the latter. Your choice.