

One grateful father, in a distant land, a distant time

It was December, 1968. I was 26 years old and had only been in Vietnam a little over a month as a development advisor assigned to a Military Assistance Command assigned Sa Dec Province in the Mekong Delta. I was driving to MACV provincial headquarters when the calm of a languid tropical afternoon was abruptly broken by a crowd of wildly gesturing people standing in the middle of the road.



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Since the Tet Offensive had been only a few months earlier, my first reaction was one of apprehension: Was this some type of Viet Cong

trick to get me to stop? As I slowed my vehicle, I could see a young man emerge carrying the limp body of a boy about 8 or 9 years old, whose eyes were shut and his stomach covered with blood.

I reached over, opened the door, and pulled the seat forward and the young man climbed into the back seat of the truck holding what turned out to be his younger brother. As I pulled the door shut, he told me in Vietnamese that there was a gun in the house, someone had been playing with it and his younger brother had been shot and now appeared dead.

I knew there was a military hospital on the other side of town, and so with the horn blaring and the headlights flashing, I began driving wildly through the heart of this typical provincial town, made up of narrow streets clogged with pedicabs, motorbikes, and vendors.

Once I was through the market area, the biggest impediment of all remained. It was a one-lane bridge that crossed the Sa Dec canal, which had a person sitting in a tower in the middle holding a stop-and-go sign. The hospital was on the other side and there was no other way across.

As I roared up the ramp, cutting off other vehicles to go on to the bridge, the sign turned to stop. I could see at the other end a convoy of huge Vietnamese military trucks beginning to pull onto the bridge. The military always took precedence over civilian traffic, and such convoys would sometimes take 15 or 30 minutes or more to pass. Thinking we could not wait, I drove out onto the bridge and at high speed raced toward the other end straight at the oncoming trucks.

The Vietnamese military drivers began sounding their powerful truck horns and waving to me to back off. They were not about to back down from a smaller civilian vehicle. But I just kept coming and when I got up close to the lead truck, I leaned out the window and yelled in Vietnamese that someone inside was gravely wounded.

Whether it was out of compassion because they understood what I was saying, or a judgment that I was crazy and never going to back up, the military drivers backed their trucks off the bridge. I swerved around the lead truck and off the bridge and drove last few hundred meters to the entrance to the military hospital.

Once there, I had to talk my way past a non-English speaking sentry, so I could drive in and begin looking for the emergency room. We were soon there and the hospital staff came out and helped carry the apparently lifeless young boy inside.

Later in the afternoon, I went back to the hospital, expecting I would be told that the young boy had either been dead on arrival or had died shortly thereafter. I was therefore surprised when one of the Vietnamese military doctors greeted me and led me into the ward where the young boy, now surrounded by his family, was lying in bed.

The next afternoon as I was leaving my office, an older Vietnamese man approached me. It was the young boy's father. They were obviously a poor family. Without saying a word, he reached forward and grabbed my right hand with both of his hands and then in a most un-Vietnamese-like gesture came forward and pressed his body onto my arm and squeezed as tight as he could. Then keeping hold of my hand he started to lead me across the road and down to the banks of the Sa Dec canal toward a very rudimentary restaurant.

We had what was the equivalent of the best table in the house, except there was no house — just a totally open-air restaurant with a wobbly table and little three-legged stools to sit on set on the mud just a few feet from the edge of the dirty river. All through the meal there never was a sentence spoken or exchanged, only a constant, wonderful smile on the father's face and a look of deep gratitude and affection in his eyes that he never took off me.

When we finished the meal he squeezed my hand again and we went our separate ways. I never met him again or his son. But I can remember to this day the look of supreme happiness on the father's face and the feel of him intensely holding my arm. It brings home to me in a way that few other things could — that the greatest treasure of Father's Day is the love a father feels for his children.