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How Operation Brotherhood got to Viet Nam

OSCAR J. ARELLANO

WHAT I will relate to you today will not be events which can even be considered as footnotes to history. When we arrived in Saigon, we knew little of Vietnamese history. There were no books in English on Viet Nam that we could buy. We had to find things out for ourselves. We had to learn by asking, to feel by watching, and to participate and to observe history in the making. Whatever we did was guided by the experiences of my generation of Filipinos: a story of the faith that we thought we could give to another country in Asia because we too have been given faith by many other countries in our past.

First, I would like to make it clear that I am not an expert on Viet Nam. I possess neither the academic background nor the disciplines which are the ingredient required in the writing of history. I can only speak of the experiences of my generation and of our times, experiences which are similar to those of our neighbor countries and their peoples.

THE PHILIPPINE CONTEXT

My generation knew firsthand the shock following upon an act of invasion by a foreign power; the feverish reaction as we offered our services in our country's defense; the ecstasy of battle arising from the knowledge that there was purpose in living and dying for a cause that sublimated suffering and frustration.

My generation also knew the helplessness and the barrenness of being defeated and occupied. We knew— only then— how precious was freedom, when what we had taken for granted was lost to us.

Finally, we learned an appalling truth in the years of Japanese occupation. In the struggle to survive, we learned to dissimulate as we gave in to the necessity of mistrusting others, of lying, of cheating, of becoming an island even to one's self, of assuming a mask of docility before the figures of authority; while all the while, we were consumed with an all-pervading hatred for the forces that were brutalizing our people and destroying the spiritual values that we had cherished.

Physically, the family became the outlet for our feelings of tenderness and solidarity. Its welfare and its survival became the essence and the purpose for our living. For most of us, it became the reason for seeming collaboration with the enemy; for others, the reason to continue the struggle with arms. But one emotion was shared in common: the urge to destroy the rule of Force, and to survive to see its accomplishment and realization.

In the midst of this transition of sheer selfishness for the sake of survival, there was a selflessness born from a fierce sense of nationalism, or pride in ourselves for what we could give and the sufferings we could endure for our country.

I recall our sorrows and our pride whilst we remained a Philippine Army (integrated with the U.S. Armed Forces) in the green hell of Bataan; our sadness at the news of the fall of Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia, Burma, Guam; our pride in the fact that we still remained fighting, in the knowledge that our country was still unconquered; the pride and fierce loyalties among friends and comrades.

There was one chink in our armor of cynicism; the surging warmth and friendliness for people irrespective of whether they were enemy or ally; for genuine selfless kindness and consideration of personal dignity; for genuine concern over our

vates those who believe in democratic principles as a way of life.

This, the dynamic Ramon Magsaysay understood. As Secretary of Defense, he used the mailed fist against those who bore arms, but tempered his policy with compassion and attraction for those who were not communists and who could be shown that Democracy as a way of life was a more humane and effective means towards the achievement of social and economic justice.

Magsaysay called on the civic and religious groups of the country to participate in demonstrating the effectiveness of ethical behavior in generating the spiritual, social and economic betterment of all classes. His approach was a stirring challenge to the Filipino to prove that pragmatic results could be achieved by the application of ideals in man's behavior towards his fellow man.

The Philippine Jaycees responded to his call, and launched a project called "Help Juan!" They called for those who were better off in life to share their blessings with those who had less. This could be done by sharing skills and backstopping their efforts with funds and knowhow.

Magsaysay's policy of "all-out Force and all-out Friendship" blunted and finally destroyed the intellectual support and the mass base that had constituted Huk strength at the time. A grateful nation elected him overwhelmingly as its new President. The emerging countries looked at the Philippine experiment, but they were themselves too involved in their problems of nation building to discern the real reason for Magsaysay's success.

THE CHALLENGE IN VIET NAM

It was in this context that some of us who were Jaycees then asked our President to support us in extending these experiences to our neighbors in Asia. We called it "Brotherhood" and we premised its methods on the implementation of the Jaycee Creed, and on the common ethical concept shared by all men: namely, the direct application of the Golden Rule in the service of others.

We felt (and we feel) that this experience was something we could offer humbly, but with conviction that our people could be infused with a sense of mission, a feeling of pride in being able to share their know-how; a realization of how much could be learned by association and teamwork with others. Above all, a desire to tangibly demonstrate the ethical values that we as a people stood for and shared with other nations that believed in the dignity and worth of the individual.

When our President heartily endorsed this plan, the Philippines sought and won the Vice Presidency of the Asian Jaycees, and promptly launched the challenge to the Jaycees of Asia to band together and launch a program—not of Asia for the Asians, but of Asians helping Asians.

It was in Viet Nam in 1954 where, in my capacity as Asian Vice-President for JCI, that I was witness to the gallant efforts of the Jaycees, the Rotarians, the Boy Scouts, and the Womens' Clubs in Saigon to feed and care for the mass of refugees who were streaming into the embattled capital of Viet Nam from the countryside. There, I was told that there were only 120 doctors who could minister to the needs of this nation of 15,000,000 people.

Meanwhile, over the capital hung a pall of doubt, fear, and the frustration of those who were helpless in the face of possible defeat. The battle of Dien Bien Phu was at its height. The cafés on Rue Catinat were full of prognostications that the communist forces of Ho Chi Minh would take over. The government of Buu Loc was toppling. There was frantic search for a strong man around whom the nation could rally.

I recall being seated with the young Jaycee son-in-law of a former Premier. Quietly, he told me: "It looks very dark indeed. But Viet Nam has been used to darkness. We have warred with China for many years. Today, this struggle has even worse connotations. It means the destruction of our family system, of our right to worship, and even the desire for freedom makes of us allies with the French. We, who want independence above everything else. We are called the lackeys of the French. But who cares what we are called? We know we are Vietnamese first."

Another Jaycee, a young agriculturist in the government service, told me in halting English: "Ho Chi Minh may be communist, but he is a nationalist. He may be allied with China, but how else can we gain independence from France?"

A young Colonel (later General) Nguyen Van Hinh, told me: "Our country needs laughter to sustain frustration, but we need discipline to win. The army can give that. We need force to attain discipline!"

The words of another Jaycee were electrifying: "I am a Catholic. I don't like communism. Maybe I will be killed if they win. But what our people do not understand is that Democracy is Humanity... That is why we are always fighting. All our history is fighting. Being free, being conquered, losing freedom when we mistake license and licentiousness for it. But we have always fought back. You licked communism with firmness and kindness. But the intellectuals here fight among themselves!"

These were words spoken long ago. Perhaps it was because we saw ourselves in them, and knew what war and civil strife can do to a man's soul, that made us want to help them. This was where our Filipino youth could learn what we of our generation had learned through suffering. It was the lessons of war, and of man's inhumanity to man, that our youth had to see if they were to treasure freedom. This was where Asians could help an Asian country and in the process, help themselves.

President Magsaysay was sympathetic. Officially, he could not help us as there were no diplomatic relations between our countries at the time. But we were free to do what we could as citizens. A plan was outlined of medical and social assistance from the Philippines. But would we be welcomed by the Vietnamese? The outgoing Philippine Jaycee Board approved the plan as a Philippine endeavor, provided the Vietnamese government would welcome us.

Dien Bien Phu fell. A new Premier was chosen by Emperor Bao Dai—the intensely nationalist Ngo Dinh Diem. We

asked President Magsaysay for a letter to the new leader. I recall the general tenor of that letter:

We are your neighbors and your friends. I am sending this through two of my close friends. If as a Government head I cannot officially help, our citizens can and are eager to do so.

The exact wording escapes me. At any rate, Ramon del Rosario (now President of Fil-Oil that represents Gulf Oil in this country) and I went to see the new Premier with Col. Jose Banzon, our military observer in Viet Nam.

NGO DINH DIEM

It was the day after the Geneva Conference, when we first met the man who had helped Viet Nam so much in the critical period of her history, the legendary Premier, Ngo Dinh Diem. Our first impression of the man was for a fleeting moment that of the "Little King" in the comics. But this was immediately dispelled by the shyness, the loneliness almost, and, one could sense, the aura of inflexible purpose that lay beneath the placid exterior.

We stood there in the old French Governor's palace, and watched him, as he read the message of the Philippine President. Tears came to his eyes. He looked up, speaking so softly his words were barely audible, "We thought we no longer had friends. Our allies have dismembered our country. But from a small country comes the first sign of concern and offer of friendship. We welcome you into the hearts of our people."

REFUGEES

He asked the Vietnamese Jaycee President to accompany us to Haiphong and Hanoi. There we saw the refugees, miles and miles of them, trekking to these two zones for voluntary exile from their ancient homes. Hanoi was a vast marketplace where priceless ancient possessions were heaped for sale together with the humble belongings of the poor, who only asked for the means to flee this now communist-held land. There were pitiful stubs of pencils and crayons, schoolbooks,

family heirlooms, cribs, vases rare and common, pots, pans, ancestral altar pieces.

We stood there deeply touched. I must admit, all of us felt like weeping. When a young mother held out her infant child and implored us to take it with us to the South. We saw the church altars ablaze with candles and the faithful on their knees: suppliants in their helplessness seeking hope in their God. The same scenes were repeated in the pagodas.

In Haiphong, young girls and boys in their pitiful finery with candles in their hands making their first (and we prayed, not their last) Communion.

Everywhere there were banners and cries of: "Freedom YES—communism NEVER!" as translated by our Vietnamese friend.

Such incidents live in us who saw at close range the heroism and the gallantry of these people. It is this knowledge that enables us to pity the "experts," national and foreign, who loudly proclaim that the continuing struggle in Viet Nam is a Sino-American power-struggle and therefore does not have the support of the Vietnamese people.

Upon our return to Manila, a press conference was held, and an appeal was made for aid to our friends and neighbors in distress. "Yes, count on us!" was the reply that came from the Jaycee chapters in Taiwan, Korea, Japan, Hongkong, Singapore, Thailand, Laos, Burma, India and Pakistan.

President Magsaysay and his Vice President, Carlos P. Garcia, directed the Foreign Affairs office to issue special passports to our personnel, as a clear support of their administration and of our people for this endeavor. The Philippine President provided us with two airlifts to Viet Nam, to enable Social Welfare officials and civic and religious groups to see for themselves how they could help this effort. The planes were loaded with medicines and relief goods.

We were among the last to leave Hanoi on the afternoon of the 8th of October, 1954, a day prior to the official take-over by Viet Minh troops. As we left in our Philippine plane,

unable to take with us the refugees who wept because they could not be taken along, dusk and the Bamboo Curtain fell behind us.

The first contingent of our doctors and nurses landed in Saigon on the 14th of October, 1954. Thus was a concept born. We called it "Operation Brotherhood." We have often been asked if "OB" is patterned after the Peace Corps. As it happens, OB antedated the Peace Corps by several years.

INTERNATIONAL AID

As Asian resources were limited, we needed help from the more affluent countries. So we went to Mexico, where, at the International Jaycees Convention, Asia presented its problems to the Jaycee world. The response was unanimous, and the JCI undertook its first international program, and supported it for the unprecedented period of two years, holding in abeyance even its own national programs.

I would like to take this occasion to pay tribute to the Jaycees of the United States and the vital role they played in this project. Because of their action, Operation Brotherhood continued to operate beyond two years, and is existing today in Laos.

The U.S. Jaycees presented this program to their National Council held in Washington in November, 1954, where it was accepted unanimously. A group of U.S. Jaycees introduced us to Vice President Nixon, who asked how he could help. We answered, "All we can offer are our minds and our experiences and, if need be, our lives. But can your government help your citizens in helping us in launching this people-to-people program?" His answer was an emphatic "Yes." Today, our efforts in Laos are formally recognized in a contract with the U.S.A.I.D. through the Royal Lao Government on a partnership basis, as an independent national voluntary agency.

We are proud to say that this was perhaps the first partnership contract of the citizens of two free nations to work as copartners in serving another country.

One might recall, with perhaps a bit of nostalgic sadness and pride, that at one time, the flags of Asia flew beside the standards of the U.S., Canada, Mexico, and the Latin American countries of JCI, as well as those of Britain, France, Germany, other parts of Europe, and of our generous friends from Australia and New Zealand. Those flags were not the symbols of war, but the symbols of the Humanity that made these nations free. They were emblems of their own self-sacrifice of giving to others what they themselves perhaps needed for their own peoples. They spoke in a language all Viet Nam could understand.

We like to think that our sincere attempts to be of help may have made it easier for the gallant and ill-fated Mr. Diem to galvanize his people to action and urge them to the task of nation building, for they knew then that they were not alone.

CIVIL WAR

We were also witness to the exodus of the Viet Minh forces from the South. But, strangely enough, there was not the same frenzy or the urgency such as that which gripped the refugees from the North. The old and the very young, with only few dependents, moved northward. To us even at the time, the reason became painfully clear. If the South did not fall to the communists through the technical machinery of the Geneva Accords, it would fall by other means. There was to be no peace in South Viet Nam until after the communists had taken over and their enemies as usual were terrorized, discredited by slander, or assassinated. What we were witnessing were the makings of the present crisis known as the new phase of the Viet Nam War.

For twenty-six months we were witness to the harassments and violence which marked that period—dubbed by some experts as South Viet Nam's "halcyon days." We have worked in these areas that today are in the front pages: Dong Ha at the 17th parallel, Quang Tri, Hue, Danang, Quang Ngai, Blao, Qui Nhon, Phan Thiet, Bien Hoa, Saigon-Cholon, My Tho, Tay Ninh, Long Xuyen, Rach Gia, Cantho, Soctrang, Caisan,

Gia Rai and Camau. There were twenty-six stations in eighteen provinces of what was once the twenty-one provinces of South Viet Nam but, which now has forty-one. During this period, 235 doctors, nurses, social workers, dentists, agriculturists, mechanics, administrators, and other workers ministered to a total of 730,000 patients in our hospitals, infirmaries, clinics, and to many others through the OB mobile teams.

We witnessed in these areas, the dread of the people in cooperating with the governmental efforts out of their fear of Viet Minh guerrilla units, who were active even then. We noted also the appalling problems of the Government in dealing with these recovered areas, not only because of the lack of administrators, but particularly because of the war-lord mentality of some of the provincial authorities who ruled with autonomous dictation.

We witnessed the inevitable reprisals committed by some of the new authority figures, who could think only of avenging the torture and killings of kin and friends. There were also the absentee landlords, who now demanded from the tenants the produce of their fields to cover even their back debts.

These were the problems of the new Administration. It was compounded by the suspicion of its own allies, the French, the Sects and the Binh Xuyen, who were fearful that the new administration would not respect what they considered were their rights. Used to intrigue, they plotted to remove the new Premier, launching a campaign of defeatism and accusing the government of venality and of favoring Christians against the predominantly Confucianist and Buddhist population. Among the critics was Bao Dai, himself. These accusations even found credence among some of the Americans. Some foreign observers and news correspondents accepted the accusations at face value.

Thus were sown the seeds of Diem's eventual destruction and of the end of French influence for the next decade.

Diem's first action was to take over the Vietnamese Armed Forces which was French-dominated. He expelled General Van Hinh. The French who were understandably sensitive in

defeat, saw in this action a sign that they were to be disregarded and even discriminated against. Their reaction was unfortunate for all concerned.

The consequence of these actions triggered the first of three civil wars. The Binh Xuyen, an organization composed of former river pirates and who had been given the police command of Saigon and Cholon, attacked the Presidential Palace.

The Armed Forces were hard pressed and only the timely intervention of the ardent nationalist Cao Daist General Trinh Minh The turned the tide, and together with Generals Nguyen Van Hue and Nguyen Giac Ngo of the Hoa Hao, completely smashed the Binh Xuyen. Only French intervention prevented complete annihilation of the remnants of the Binh Xuyen forces. General Trinh Minh The was killed in that action.

When the regional JCI convention was held in 1955, a group of JCI officials came to Saigon. One of the plans of the Viet Nam Jaycees was a floral offering to the martyr General in the Blue Mountain of Tay Ninh.

We were not fully aware at the time of the frictions between the Vietnamese and the French. But after this visit, the French members of the Viet Nam Jaycees suddenly became cool. French support which had been warm and kind, suddenly turned into icy frigidity, if not hostility. Operation Brotherhood and the Filipinos became the targets of innuendos and attacks, as being tools of the U.S. Government. These rumors however, fell on deaf ears, even among the Sects and the Viet Minh sympathizers.

TEARS AND CHAMPAGNE

Even during the fighting between the Government and the Binh Xuyen, the Cao Dai, and the Hoa Hao forces, Operation Brotherhood units worked in their strongholds of Cholon, Long Xuyen, and Tay Ninh. It ministered to the wounded and the families of the battling forces, treating both sides with equal devotion.

In the Island of Long Kien in Long Xuyen, OB units would be escorted by Nationalist forces up the river crossing.

OB then moved in alone, to be met on the opposite bank by the black uniformed troops of the Hoa Hao.

When the Nationalist troops surrounded the military headquarters of the Cao Dai, and it was bruited that the members of the OB unit there were being held as hostages, both sides refrained from combat. We arrived in the area almost at dusk. The Cao Daists with tears in their eyes begged us to please take the OB unit out, because they could not fight for fear the Government "beasts" would take reprisals. We agreed to take the OB team out. The Cao Dai soldiers helped us load all of the OB luggage and equipment into their trucks. The members of the OB team then climbed into the trucks—but before the trucks could move off on the road to Saigon, the Cao Dai commanding officer ordered them to dismount. The OB personnel obeyed, their hearts in their throats. Alarmed, we asked the officer why he had ordered the team to get off the trucks. The officer's reply was unforgettable:

"When they were with us, they gave us of their best. Now that they leave us, we want them to have the best."

The Cao Dai general staff stood before the team. An old sergeant who had been assigned to the Philippine team went around, tears streaming down his cheeks, serving champagne to the Filipinos. The commanding officer proposed a toast: "To Brotherhood!" The OB team replied, "Long live Viet Nam."

Then the staff cars moved up, and the OB doctors and nurses were assisted into the cars by the staff, while the soldiers milled around saying goodbye.

Somewhere on the banks of the Waico River is a white monument built by the people of Tayninh in memory of three OB personnel who died while serving the people. But that evening, all we could see were tanks and armored cars preparing for combat—the combat that had been halted so that the members of Operation Brotherhood could be safely evacuated and not suffer harm.

Later we learned that President Diem had granted the beleaguered Cao Dai the privilege to surrender with honor.

We left Viet Nam in December 1956. Many other incidents occurred during our 26-month involvement there—too many to be retold now, and perhaps not worth the telling. They can never be important enough to become part of history. They are, however, part of ourselves—and, we hope, part of the people of Viet Nam who are today still fighting for life and freedom.

EPILOGUE

Someday, many years hence, someone may stumble upon this little fragment of human endeavor, and may even find it sufficiently curious to write about Operation Brotherhood's history. If such a history should ever be written, we hope that it will emphasize two things: 1) Our pride in having been given the privilege to serve the people of South Viet Nam. 2) Our gratitude to those whose generosity made possible the realization of a Philippine dream.*

* This paper was originally delivered as one of the lectures at the Seminar on South East Asia and the Philippines, held at the Ateneo de Manila in July and August 1966, and attended by 20 American teachers from various States of the Union. The Seminar was sponsored by the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare.—EDITOR'S NOTE.