

NEWSLETTER ON VIETNAM MISSION SEPTEMBER-OCTOBER 2010

By Derek Smith

Greetings Folks,

It is fair to say that as a direct result of your generosity, I have had another very productive stint in Kon Tum, Vietnam. By the time I departed, I had AUD \$10500 to use across all six orphanages and the leprosarium. It goes such a long way over there and really does build on the quality of life of everyone.

With me on this mission was my wife, Rhonda, an old mate from my 32 Small Ships days, Graham Rogers, another good Sapper mate since 1969, Neill Garland and his wife Terry. All gave wonderful support to the orphanages both financially and in every other sense. It was great to have such good friends helping out. We all stayed at the Family Hotel in Kon Tum where the hotel lives up to its name. We really are treated by Mr. Phong and Mrs. Le, as family. I remained in Kon Tum from 18 September until 16 October. The others left about the end of September.

Just a few statistics to set the scene. During my 32 days in Kon Tum, I visited the orphanages on 64 occasions which is on average, 2 per day, although I sometimes managed to get to four (4) in one day. I took kids to doctors on four occasions. I visited the Leprosarium on three occasions. I took a bus load of 20 folks to the beach at Qui Nhon (4 hours drive there and 4 back – a long day). So it is fair to say, one was busy.

The MiVAC Road Repair Project

The orphans at Vinh Son 1 orphanage in Kon Tum, Vietnam sing a song called “The Climb”. Part of the words is as follows;

*“There’s always gonna be another mountain
I’m always gonna wanna make it move
Always gonna be an uphill battle
Sometimes I’m gonna have to lose
Ain’t about how fast I get there
Ain’t about what’s on the other side
It’s the climb.”*

This song epitomizes the journey to reach the opening of the new crossing named Kon Klor Two Crossing, Kon Tum, Central Highlands, Vietnam. The journey began in 2007 when my wife and I were shown another crossing on the Dak Bla River just beyond the village of Kon Katu. With us were Mr. Kheo, Village Chief, Mr. Hau and Mr. Ho, all of whom are now good friends.

Rob Woolley of MiVAC had asked me to keep an eye out for possible projects in Vietnam. This looked like a good one to undertake. And so the process began with an initial plan developed by my good friend Elvin Smith. Then Walter Kopek and two civil engineers from Thailand visited the site and further developed the plan. We then linked with the NGO, East Meets West Foundation, without whose cooperation, the project could not have been achieved.

Typhoon Ketsana in September 2009 caused so much damage to the original site and put work there well out of our financial reach, that we were invited to select another site. As it turned out, funding for the work at the original site came from somewhere so it now has a substantial crossing. A great outcome.

On 14th October 2010 I was finally able to set the plaque for the crossing, in stone as it were. This climb was over. I was honored and humbled to have good friends present for this milestone, but more significantly, to have children from Vinh Son 1 and Vinh Son 5 orphanages there. The crowning moment was when, after having spoken about the song, the kids from Vinh Son 1 sang it for all present.



The Crossing in November 2009



The Crossing in April 2010



At the Naming Ceremony October 2010



The Plaque now in place at the Crossing



Folks from Vinh Son 1 and 5 Orphanages at the Crossing

The Leprosarium

Again, thanks to the generosity of my local GP, Dr. Richard Keyes and QML Pathology, I was able to provide the Leprosarium with crepe bandages (unobtainable in Vietnam) and surgical kits. The situation there is that the folks suffering with the disease are cared for by the Government however their families have to fend for themselves. Given that anyone associated with a leper is treated as though they too have the disease, getting by is a daily struggle. We provided VND 10,000,000.00 for rice, cooking oil and noodles.

During the issuing of this food, I noticed a young boy in the queue. I asked what his situation was. The sisters brought him over to me and unbuttoned his shirt to reveal the beginnings of the disease under his arm. He was 10 years old. I asked his name then told him mine and gave him a hug. The sad little face revealed a smile. Most people in the villages are terrified of having any contact with these people. When I think of this incident, ironically it makes me feel sad. God knows, these poor folk need our continued support.



Lepers line up with their carry baskets, for food



Some of the lepers with donated medical supplies



The struggle is obvious on her face.

Vinh Son 1

VS1 had 215 children when I left Kon Tum. I have just learned that they have taken two new babies; twins, whose parent cannot afford to look after them, a common occurrence in Vietnam. How would one say no when confronted with a call for help like that. I spent a good deal of time trying my hand at teaching English through song. The big hit was John Williamson's "Give me a Home Among the Gum Trees". I reckon the man himself would get a buzz from hearing these happy youngsters singing this. Australia has left a mark in Kon Tum.

Our good friend Graham (NZ but lives in Holland) was also in Kon Tum while we were there. He does a great job teaching the children English, again through song and games. I spent a bit of time with him in the class rooms. The kids have a lot of fun learning this way, and it works.

Our mission coincided with Autumn Moon Festival which sees children performing dragon dances everywhere. One night at VS1, Neill and Terry Garland via their donors, provided ice cream for all the children which was great fun. We were rewarded with the dragon dance, other traditional dances and songs. The ice creams are a very special treat.



Moon Festival Dragon Dance VS1



Ethnic Dancing VS1



Is that ice cream any good- you bet – VS1

Although VS1 is the best off of all the orphanages, it still has need of supplies. We provided new shoes for 200 children, hygiene/cleaning supplies, more tooth brushes and tooth paste, rice, cooking oil and other staples. We also provided a TV and DVD player for the class room. It is a great learning resource and provides a bit of entertainment for the kids.

Dave Penson had sold off or donated, some of the contents of the BBBH container. I managed to sell /give away the remainder of the goods. All proceeds of sales went into the orphanages. Included in the contents was a huge roll of very strong plastic. When divided up, we were able to give 13 meters to each of the six orphanages. It can be used for drying cassava/manioc leaves, rice and other crops the orphanages grow for feeding the children. We also had two huge rolls of geotextile (used in road construction). This has also been divided up to all the orphanages and is being used over doorways to keep out the winter winds. Our sincere thanks to BBBH and Matthew Duly, for donating all these supplies to us.

Vinh Son 2

Sr. Jeanne continues her wonderful work here and was happy to see us although we did not spend as much time at VS2 as in past visits. We did however provide more medicines, arranged for repairs of windows and doors to the dining room and the main security gate (thanks to Teresa's husband Dung), provided a new storage cupboard for one of the class rooms and provided a new DVD player. The new septic system we put in last year is working fine and the additions to the boy's dormitory that Dave Penson arranged for are well used.

Also coming from Townsville were crocheted rugs and woolen hats for the babies We distributed these to VS1 and 2 since they are the only VS to have babies, until we heard of the baby at VS3 (see below). The kids here really seem to feel the cold and as the wet season closes and the winter comes in, these items are really appreciated. My thanks to Ian and Barb Cameron and their supporters for these gifts for the littlies.

We also distributed surgical kits to all the VS orphanages. These supplies are very expensive for the orphanages and are always used so such contributions are really appreciated. My thanks to Rosemary Darcy of QML Pathology for this great support. Thanks also to Ken Riley and Lyn Eaton of Ballycara Retirement Village, Redcliffe; we have provided three sets of playground equipment for VS1, 2 and 5. These all have reasonably flat ground whereas 3, 4 and 6 are very hilly so this equipment is not safe for the other three. The equipment was made locally which is good for the economy, and the kids will derive a lot of enjoyment from such items.



Derek with Phong and friends at VS2



Miss Him, Miss Bil and kids VS1 with rugs



At VS1 with the donated woollies

Vinh Son 3

During my stay, I was honored to be invited to attend the wedding of Mr. Hau's daughter. As the only non Vietnamese there and it being my first Vietnamese wedding, it was a wonderful treat. Also attending was Sr. Gabrielle from VS3. It gave me the opportunity to ask her how things were going at VS3. She was a nursing sister during the war so she is no spring chicken but is full of energy and love for the kids in her care. Her greatest need was for medical supplies so that was an easy fix for us. VS3 is very well run and has about 80 children.

During one of my visits to VS3, I was told an amazing story. Last year, they did not have babies there. They just were not set up for that. Anyway, the children observed a motorbike come up the track to the orphanage, stop briefly then head off again. Shortly after they heard howling noises coming from bushes nearby, so told Sr. Gabrielle. She investigated and found a baby boy about one month old, abandoned in the bushes. What else could she do but take this poor little tacker into care. He is now two months old and has been named A Phong. He is just the most beautiful little child and of course the kids at VS3 fuss over him. A sad but all too often occurring event near the orphanages in Kon Tum.



Sr. Gabrielle with receipts at VS3



Sr. Gabrielle and assistant opening medicine supplies

Vinh Son 4

A lot has been done at VS4 since my last visit. They have a new pig house which I think Dave had a hand in. The old one got trashed during Typhoon Ketsana last year. There are improved dormitories for the kids which is good to see. There were 15 children sick though and Sr. Lieng had no money for medicine. This seems to be across the board with all the VS. She gave me a list of what she needed and Mr. John who has been such an incredible help, reckoned it was ok, so rather than hold off, I gave her money. Next visit all the kids were back on their feet. I suspect it was a virus.

Another issue at VS4 is that many of the children seemed to be lagging at school. This was attributed to the fact that they weren't getting enough rice. The greens, mainly manioc that they harvest in the forest does not provide the protein. So we provided VND10M for one ton of rice which will suffice until the end of the year. We also provided a new medicine cabinet that could be secured. As we had found at VS2, kids just seem to help themselves to pills and potions which is not a good thing. Sr. Monique who must be in her late 80's is still battling on at VS4. What an amazing group of dedicated ladies.



Nap time at VS4



Some of the rice we provided for VS4



Sr. Lieng VS4

Vinh Son 5

Teresa Lung, Sr. Truc and all the kids at VS5 were so happy to see me again and to meet my wife Rhonda and the others in our group. Neill and Terry Garland have continued with their wonderful support for VS5. Some of the children here were also sick and Graham Rogers displayed such care, it was very moving to see this compassion. He contributed a large amount to the mission which is really appreciated. The new crossing has improved life so much at VS5. They are still one of the poorest of the orphanages and need our continuing support.

We were invited to a Moon Festival dinner and concert at VS5. We took along Moon Cakes which is considered a very special treat for this festival. Not that we were familiar with these cakes, but we were very surprised to learn that the kids at VS5 had never had Moon Cakes before. The first item of the concert was the traditional dragon dance. Everywhere else we had seen this done, the dragons were quite spectacular and other masks quite flash. VS5 had made masks out of paper and colored them in. The dragon was represented by two long pieces of cloth. The simplicity of their improvisation made the event all the more special. Next year they will have a proper dragon and masks thanks to all our donors.

It is great to see these children enjoy simple pleasures. Children from Annandale State School and Good Shepherd Catholic School, both in Townsville, wrote to the orphans, made friendship bands, games, drawings and kites, all of which created so much fun. The children from VS1 and 5 have written back so my hope is that this exchange will continue. Good Townsville friends Alison and Ben Bonomini, donated toy bears which we gave to the kids.



Children at VS5 with their kites made by children at Good Shepherd Catholic School , Townsville



VS5 kids getting ready for Dragon Dance

We were also able to kit each of the children out with school uniforms which they did not have before and was the cause of ridicule from other kids. We provided them with suit cases which replaced the cardboard boxes they were using to store their belongings in. Each child got a wash basin, new tooth brush, paste soap and face washer, all to encourage better hygiene. Teresa expressed concern about adequate food for the children. VS5 has grown to 70. She has estimated that it costs VND305000.00 per day to feed all the children; VND 5000.00 per child. Now in our money that is 0.25cents per day for each child and \$15 per day for all the kids there. We provided her with money for 3 months of nutritious food. I do not yet have receipts for this but Teresa keeps a book in which she records every contribution we make. I trust her completely.

The cooking at VS5 was done outside on a wood fire. This is not a good situation so we are having a new kitchen built including a good quality rice steamer, good ventilation, good lighting, tap water and a good fit-out that will be done by Mr. Phong from the Family Hotel who has recently refurbished the dining room/kitchen there. We have also funded a small parcel of land so more food can be grown. I know we will see great changes at VS5 on our next mission. They also have a washing machine which will make a huge difference to hygiene. All clothes are currently washed by the kids at the well.



New Uniforms and other goods VS5



Khoi and Bui who were both sick but ok now



New toy bears at VS5

One of my great enjoyments during this trip was taking children to the beach. The nearest beach is at Qui Nhon. This is a four hour drive from Kon Tum, and of course, four hours back. Twenty folks came including Teresa, her husband Dung, one of the sisters from VS5. The children were selected on the basis of their school ability. That was not a call I would have enjoyed making but I guess, as we could not take 70 kids, there had to be some way to allocate seats. Coi and Boi from VS1 also came along. My wife and I are sponsoring Coi and Neill and Terry Garland are sponsoring Boi.

Most of these children had never seen the sea. To them it was a very big river. Once they saw me jump in, there was no problem. They had the greatest time. Well so did I but my shoulders were very sore the next day. Probably had something to do with kids wanting to dive off them. We provided lunch and of course no trip to the beach is complete without ice cream. Teresa took along the kites from Good Shepherd and it just made for a fantastic day. There are few pleasures for these children but I like to think that with your help, this little indulgence was one pleasure they will remember for a long time.



Children enjoying the swim at Qui Nhon



The ice cream treats at Qui Nhon



Playing with the kites on the beach at Qui Nhon

Vinh Son 6

As mentioned earlier this was my first visit to VS6 and it is without doubt the poorest of all the VS orphanages, yet is well run. It is about 20km beyond Kon Tum and is well off the main road, so it is unlikely it will attract visitors (and contributions to assist the orphans like VS1 does) There are 32 girls and 8 boys there. The sisters are Sr. Labouret, Sr. Marie, Sr. Germain and Sr. Jut. As with all the VS, the children were happy. The smaller kids slept on the floor in the dining room as there is no space in the dormitories for them. They needed beds but I was asked to provide sleeping mats. I suggested small mattresses but that was not going to happen, and for good reason. I am a bit out of touch with little children. They wee in the night. Mats are much easier to clean. So we provided mats.

They also needed tooth brushes, paste and other hygiene essentials which we fixed. Warm clothing and footwear were also provided along with medicines and food. Lighting in the dorms was very inadequate so we had double fluorescent lights installed. The one black board in the class room was damaged, so we replaced that too. As with VS5, the children were storing their few belongings in cardboard boxes, so we gave each child a suitcase. The kitchen was similar to the one at VS5 so that will be a project for my next visit. I am sure that like VS5, this orphanage will grow in numbers so it must continue to have support.

When anyone does visit VS6, they are sure to be greeted with the cry of "Oze Oze Oze. Oie Oie Oie". It was great to hear them all shouting this when I left VS6 for the last time on this trip.



Littlies at VS6 with some of the clothing



Children and some of the Sisters at VS6



The class-room black board at VS6



Happy faces at VS6



Drying clothes at VS6



Kitchen at VS6

Conclusion

I hope this newsletter has provided a thorough snapshot of all that this mission entailed... I believe all contributions were used wisely but I am always very happy to get feedback on this. As donors, I really appreciate the great level of trust you place in me to continue this work and of course, it needs to continue. I have an excel spread sheet showing all income and expenditure as well as receipts for all donations and receipts from the orphanages for most of the expenditure. It has not always been possible to get receipts for everything. I can make all this available should you wish to see it at any time.

My final task before leaving Vietnam was to meet with our Consul General, Mr. Graeme Swift. I believe it is important for our Nation's representative in Ho Chi Minh City, to be kept up to date on all that we are achieving. He always makes time to see Dave and me when we are there and we value the time he gives us.

Again, my sincere thanks to all the wonderful supports of the Vinh Son Orphanages of Kon Tum. You are making a great difference to the lives of these wonderful children.

My kindest regards

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