



NEWSLETTER ON VIETNAM MISSION JUNE – JULY 2011
By Derek Smith

Greetings Folks,

I am again pleased to report that my time in Kon Tum this year has been a success. Whenever I am there and get stuff done, the Sisters who run the Vinh Son orphanages are always so appreciative. I am very quick to point out to them that this work would not be possible without the support and generosity of the many donors who entrust me with their contributions. I expended \$11,060 on this trip, and in addition, completed projects for MiVAC (Mines Victims and Clearance Trust) costing \$4500.

My wife Rhonda also accompanied me along with Marg Rapsey from Melbourne. Marg is the sister of one of our Townsville donors and although she had been to Vietnam before, this was her first visit to Kon Tum. Marg had raised money in Melbourne and put it to excellent use while in Kon Tum. It makes a great difference to have other folk on board during these trips and I am very grateful for their efforts.

I am sad to report that Graham Rogers, who came on the 2010 trip, has since passed away. Graham and I served together in Vietnam in 1966. He was a terrific mate and is missed by many including those friends he made while in Kon Tum. Fr. Lien, who was a wonderful advocate for the VS orphans and the Minority people of Kon Tum, recently lost his battle with cancer. He was travelling back to Kon Tum when he passed away. He was a truly Christian man and will be missed by so many. Another sad passing was one of the twin girls from VS2. I have known these children since 2007 and had enjoyed playing with them and the other kids during our many visits. I am not sure which one has died or how she died. It is so sad that she will not grow up but perhaps she is in a better place. May these three friends rest in peace.



The people of Kon Tum at Fr. Lien's Funeral



His traditional Montagnard Coffin



The twins of VS2, Y At and Y Anh

The time spent in Kon Tum is always hectic and as will be appreciated, is very mentally demanding, particularly when one is trying to identify the most pressing needs in liaison with the Sisters in charge, via an interpreter. Sometimes things do get lost in translation but without the support of Mr. John Ho a teacher at Vinh Son 1, and Teresa Lung who is a tireless worker at VS 5, I just would not make any progress. My sincere thanks to all these wonderful folks.

Just to give an insight into the pace, on 10 July which was the day before I left Kon Tum, we visited VS6, then 4 then had lunch at 3, then visited a village to see mothers of two children in VS1, then had a meeting at Family Hotel, then went to a village to the south where we had supported some minority women who were sick, then to VS1 to say goodbye, then to VS5 to say goodbye, then to Teresa's home for dinner, then back to Family Hotel to pack. Now not every day was like that, but we would usually visit at least two orphanages each day. Am I complaining – NO. Would I change things – NO. Am I passionate about what I do – YOU BET.

The MiVAC Projects

I have completed a report for MiVAC on the projects for 2011 and am attaching that report to this newsletter.

Kitchen/Dining Room Project VINH SON 6

The major project for this mission was to construct a kitchen and dining room for VS6. VS6 is located about 20km from Kon Tum so poses a few logistical problems. This task was identified last year and was my main focus in fundraising. As it happened, two other organizations who do work in Kon Tum had also come up with the same idea. Friends of Vinh Son Orphanages (FSVO) is a California based group. See www.FriendsofVSO.org. Poussiers de Vie (PDV) is a French organization which focuses on helping disadvantaged children in Vietnam. See www.poussiersdevie.org

Luckily we all connected and so began a good relationship to work together to plan, fund and make this project a reality. Numerous Skype sessions and emails were exchanged along the way. The two other groups met at VS6 earlier this year, along with Mr. John and Teresa. Initial plans were developed by PDV but the cost was well beyond what funds would have been available.

What it looked like prior to Project



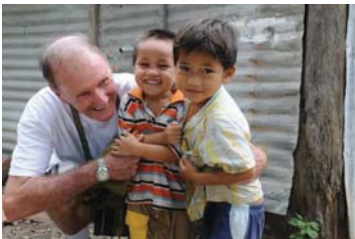
Derek and Teresa at Kitchen VS6



Cooking at VS6



Gives an idea of the size of the kitchen



Children from VS6



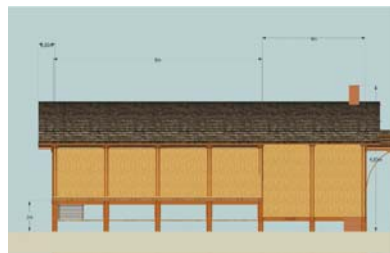
*The entrance to the kitchen VS6
The Initial Concept*



Pots and pans kitchen VS6



*Planned to have a curved thatched roof
With oven locations.*

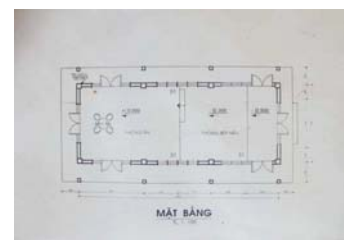
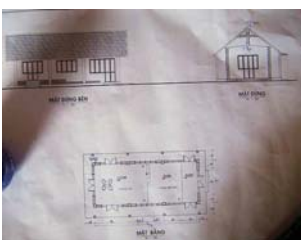


Combination of kitchen and dining room



Step up to dining room

The Final Plans



The final cost of construction was \$14000. This cost is shared between FSVO and ASK@VSO. PDV will fund fit out and some of the fixtures. The idea of the thatched roof was rejected by Sr. Labouret (who runs VS6), so tiles will now be used. Timber construction was also too costly so brick/cement will now be used. There will still be an elevated dining room.

I visited VS6 on the day prior to my departure and ran into yet another hurdle. The Sisters were scared that if Government approval was not given, the Government might pull the building down. Although this was thought to be unlikely, the wishes of the Sisters had to be respected. As it happened, written approval was given just a few days after I arrived back in Australia. Nothing happens quickly in Vietnam and patience is essential. Now I am happy to report that the building materials are on site. Kon Tum has been experiencing heavy rain so it is hoped that construction will get under way once the weather eases. Despite the frustrations though, the project is moving ahead and once completed, the children at VS6 will be able to enjoy comfortable, hygienic and livable cooking and dining facilities. I am looking forward to providing photos of the new kitchen/dining room in the not too distant future.

As earlier indicated, this was the major task for this trip so most of the funds went towards this project. It would not have been possible without the generosity of all who have supported this work. I make it a practice not to name individual donors as I respect their privacy. They know who they are and just how much I really appreciate their continuing support. However I wish to acknowledge with sincere thanks, organizations and associations for their generosity. I think I have listed them all, but if I have omitted any, please accept my apologies.

Knights of the Southern Cross Branch 46 – Wynnum, Knights of the Southern Cross Branch 93 – Pine Rivers, Knights of the Southern Cross Branch 91 – Townsville, Ministerial Region of the Good Shepherd – Townsville, Western Australian Sapper Assn, 3rd Combat Engineer Regiment – Townsville, Rotary Club Townsville Central, Rotary Sunrise – Townsville, Good Shepherd Catholic Community School (Primary) Townsville, Annandale State School (Primary), Pacific Marine – Townsville, Moreton Bay Totally and Permanently Disabled Service Persons Association – Redcliffe, Crater Lakes Rainforest Cottages – Lake Eacham Nth Queensland and the PTSD Unit and Friends – Townsville.

STOP PRESS - Good news on the kitchen front; I have just received the first photos of the construction under way.



Medical Supplies/Support

As has been the case for a number of years now, my good friend and GP, Dr. Richard Keyes of Townsville, kindly donated a large quantity of bandages and surgical kits for Kon Tum. This trip these were given to the clinic that provides care for the children of all the Vinh Son orphanages, and many minority village folks. Mr. Nglau is the nurse who operates this facility and to say he is run off his feet would be an understatement. This valuable contribution will be put to very good use.

Among the ethnic minority people (Montagnards) males are given the prefix of “A” and females, “Y”. So A Muong is a male and Y Chung is a female.

There were a number of visits to doctors, dentist and hospital during this trip. One little girl from VS5, Y Chung, needed an ear operation that would see her in hospital for a few days. When we took her along with her mother, for admission, we were told that there were so many people who were in more pressing need of surgery, she would have to come back another time. Visiting the hospital was a real eye opener. It makes one shudder to see doctors examining patients and smoking at the same time. We are so fortunate here to enjoy such high standards of health care.

A number of village women and a young girl were suffering from goiters and had to go to Danang for treatment. This was arranged by an organization called Friends of Central Highlands (FOCH). Marg Rapsey and my funds contributed VND 6M (about \$270) towards this. The people in the villages are so poor it beggars belief.

A young lad from VS1, A Muong, who I have known for a few years, has had terrible teeth. He was so self conscious about this, it was rare to see him smile. One hour in the dentist chair and VND 220000 (\$10) later, and Muong's teeth are gleaming white. I have given him three tooth brushes and have made him promise to clean his teeth three times a day.



Derek and Mr. Nglau at Clinic



Derek and Y Chung VS5



Village lady with goiter at surgery



A Muong with his mum and Brother

Some may be wondering about the children from VS having parents. Not all the children are orphans. Many have been abandoned perhaps because mum has died in child birth and the father just does not want to have the responsibility, or the father who may be Vietnamese, has had a relationship with a minority village girl. Y Chung is Bahnar, Muong is Rungau and the goiter ladies are Jarai. We took Muong to his village so he could show his Mum his clean "new" teeth.

Keeping the littlies warm

Good friends, Lyn Cockburn from Minto NSW, and Ian and Barb Cameron from Townsville, provided some beautiful knitted and crocheted jumpers, bed covers and beanies, for small children at the orphanages. It can get quite cold in Kon Tum and the littlies in particular, feel the cold. The work that must have gone into making these garments was fantastic, and thanks to their efforts, the children will be a lot warmer in the cooler months. When we were trying the clothes out on the children, it was like chaos central. The kids were just so excited. These gifts were really appreciated.



A Coi with baby VS1 and new woolen's



A Bin with littlies at VS1 trying on new gear

Vinh Son 7

I had learned from Sue Gray who has been travelling to Kon Tum and supporting the minority people for many years, that there was another Vinh Son, Number 7. We had not heard of this one before but understood it to be very poor. With Mr. John Ho's help, Rhonda, Marg and I travelled to VS7 on 22 June. Unsure of what we would find or how many children lived there, we took bags of rice, noodles, cooking oil and a range of fruits. We had to go north to Dak To then out toward s the Tri Border area. The orphanage is located near the Po Ko River. The Sister in charge is Sr. Cecil. As it turned out, it was not an orphanage but rather, a sort of boarding house where children come from outlying villages to stay so they can attend school.

There are about 100 children at VS7. About 50 boys and 50 girls. Their ages are from about 13 to 18. Because of their isolation, they rarely get visitors so they were really happy to see us and to receive our gifts of food. VS7 was really well constructed and clean and the children seemed very happy and well cared for. We were shown around and the kids sang for us. This of course was reciprocated with a burst of “Give Me A Home Among the Gum Trees” and “Waltz Sing Matilda”. Not that I am a good singer. By the time we left, we had all the children responding to Australia’s call of “Aussie, Aussie, Aussie”, with the old “Oi, Oi, Oi”. It was a great visit and I will visit them on my next trip.



Rhonda, Mr. John and Sr. Cecil VS7



With some of the children at VS7



View from VS7 to bridge over Poko River

Sponsorships

I am pleased to report that the number of sponsors for children from the orphanages is increasing. If any readers would like to be involved in this, I would really like to hear from you. Included in those being sponsored are seven children studying in Ho Chi Minh City. Three are studying for a Diploma in Nursing and four are completing their final year (12) of high school. Five are girls and two are boys, from VS 1 and 5.

I had heard reports that because these children are from minority tribes, they would not manage the higher levels of education. They all stay together, seven in one unit, and that also drew some negative comments. As I had not seen the kids in HCMC, I decided to go down and visit them to see for myself. So Teresa and I went to HCMC on the same day that Marg left. We all went to their college and met with the Vice Principal, Mr. Tran Ho Thao (MA). The college is like our TAFE here in Australia. It is called TAYNAMA College of Economics and Technology (see www.taynama.edu.vn). There are four campuses around HCMC with a total of 4000 students, so this is no small school. We also met Ms. Seng, the nursing teacher. Contrary to most reports, these kids are doing just fine and have even featured in a TV clip on the news in Vietnam.

The four children studying for year 12, will by now have had their final exams and Mr. Tran has promised to send me comments on their efforts. According to him they are all good students with no absences and he expects them to do well with their exams. This will then enable them to go on to study nursing.

We then visited the unit where the children are living. It is small and cramped with the girls sleeping upstairs and the boys downstairs. Now clearly they could do with more room but what students who live away from home do live well? They are managing ok and the accommodation is near to the college so it is not too bad. They skimp on food but we are helping out there. We took them all out to lunch and again, like students anywhere, they ate everything and we arranged doggie bags so nothing was wasted.

The key to the future of everyone, and certainly the Montagnard people, lies in education. Sponsorship provides the kids from the Vinh Son orphanages, with the opportunity to grasp that key.



Lunch with the HCMC Students, our taxi driver (who we had all day) Marg and I. It was a hot day but I was the only one to enjoy a beer

Many will know that my wife and I are sponsoring a boy from VS1. Our very good mate Neill Garland, and his wife Terry, also sponsor a boy from VS1. Both boys are mates. Anyway we took both boys on a holiday during this trip. I need to add that this was entirely paid for by ourselves and has nothing to do with funds raised. I have maintained a separate spread sheet detailing all the costs of this trip.

The two lads, A Coi and A Boi had never been on a plane or train before. We took them to Hanoi, Sapa and Hoi An. They are both 12 years old and what a time they had. I had been storing up air sick bags but didn't need a one. Everything was a totally new experience for the kids and we enjoyed playing grandma and grandpa. This is one of the really terrific things about sponsoring these kids; one can have a personal relationship with them. I thought that readers might enjoy seeing a couple of photos of this wonderful time.

We met an Aussie couple while in Hanoi, Wayne and Eileen Oxford. Wayne's dad used to train Army Apprentices from SME and he knew some of the lads from my intake from Army Apprentice School. Small world. Anyway they bought some educational goodies for the kids at the orphanages. We gave their gifts to VS6. Everything is so appreciated.



Boi and Coi at SAPA after trek into Muong villages in the hills



Enjoying a cold drink Hanoi



*Boi and Coi at Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum
We asked the sisters about doing this
and they said it was important. No worries.*



*Boi and Coi in the pool at Hoi An
They had never seen a swimming pool*



Wayne and Eileen's Gifts - VS6

Conclusion

Well, I know I have gone on a bit here and this is more like an epistle than a 'brief report', but there is always so much to share and the photos tell their own story. I hope you can see that without your continuing financial support, none of this would occur. Please know that all the folks in all the VS orphanages know that the support I bring comes from many generous donors. I can tell you that to see the smiles on little faces, is a wonderful thing. Perhaps you can make the trip and visit Kon Tum some time and meet these wonderful people. I hope so and I know they would welcome you with open arms.

I am working towards establishing a web site under the ASK@VSO banner where I can post my newsletters, news, links and video clips. I will let everyone know about that soon. I do hope you will consider sponsoring a child from the VS orphanages. I would also ask that if you are able, to please continue to donate to help me keep on helping these children. I have a special account for the Vinh Son orphanages. The BSB is 064 823. The account number is 1080 2361. It is a CBA account. Direct deposits can be made. For those who choose to use cheques, these need to be made out to me – Derek Smith. Please rest assured, they go into the VS account. It is a bank thing I guess.

My kindest regards

Derek Smith

8 Gilli Crescent, CRANBROOK QLD 4814

AUSTRALIA

dvsmith@ozemail.com.au