

A DEATH IN VIETNAM

BY WILLIAM HOLDER '75

Pete Hunting '63 became the first Wesleyan graduate to die during the Vietnam War, but his story did not end there.

FOR MORE THAN 40 YEARS, JILL HUNTING had never dared to hope that this moment would come. But now she had a map in her hand, an interpreter at her side, and thanks to the Freedom of Information Act, the coordinates where her brother, Pete Hunting '63, had been killed in Vietnam.

The interpreter had suggested they bring some flowers and incense for a ceremony. A spot covered with vegetation by the side of the road was, as near as they could determine, where the ambush took place. Jill read from the *Book of Common Prayer*, about unnumbered mercies and the shortness and uncertainty of life. The interpreter offered a Buddhist prayer.

"A lot of people walked by, but one man stayed," she says. "He said, 'Do you see that sign down there?' and pointed down the road. 'That's where they killed the American.'"

So they walked to where a path led from the road to a village. It was the exact spot in the Mekong Delta where Pete, a noncombatant who had gone to Vietnam with humanitarian intent, was brutally shot to death by a band of Viet Cong.

Pete was the first Wesleyan alumnus to die in Vietnam. His death as a member of International Voluntary Services, IVS, was reported by Walter Cronkite on the *CBS Evening News* and in the *New York Times*. American deaths in Vietnam would soon become the daily routine,

but on November 12, 1965, when Pete's family received the devastating phone call, the killing of a U.S. civilian was a shocking rarity.

Pete's story would have been long forgotten, except by those close to him, were it not for a dramatic discovery. A few years after his death, Jill asked her mother if she could reread Pete's letters. Her mother, still grief-stricken by the loss of her only son, said that all of his letters, photographs, memorabilia, and movies had been destroyed in a basement flood. These were Jill's last connection with her beloved older brother, and she felt bereft yet again.

Then, in early 2004, when a stroke had sent her mother to a nursing home, Jill and her two sisters met to sort through the accumulated belongings of their parents' 50-year marriage. They found a forgotten trunk and the key to open it. Inside were all Pete's letters and other mementos. Thus began Jill's quest to rediscover her brother and use her own skills as a writer to tell his story.

Questions about his death still linger. Had Pete been aware of the growing danger in the Mekong Delta? Was IVS the unwitting—or complicit—tool of American military and intelligence officials? Can idealistic young volunteers do good works in a war zone, or does the larger military mission hopelessly taint their efforts?

When Pete signed up with IVS in 1963, Vietnam did

Jill Hunting recovered the letters, drawings, and photos of her brother Pete '63 decades after she believed they had all been lost in a basement flood.

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not have the layers of meaning for Americans that it does today. It was a simmering conflict involving 16,000 American advisers, a footnote, and not yet the main text of American foreign policy.

On Wesleyan's campus, the civil rights movement had taken center stage. Former faculty members David Swift and John Maguire had forged links to the national movement and to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who had visited the campus in 1962 and in the winter of 1963. Concern ran high over poverty in America, not only among blacks, but also among the elderly and the rural population of Appalachia. Another issue was the failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961 and the subsequent nuclear standoff during the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, which had led to skepticism over the objectives of U.S. foreign policy.

Though overshadowed by other topics, Vietnam was beginning to provoke discussion on campus, according to Stephen Rankin '64. The United States had refused to support free elections to reunify Vietnam in 1956, and instead backed the creation of the separate state of South Vietnam. In 1963 the Diem government was the target of a growing insurgency, and U.S. support of the military regime was controversial for students who followed foreign policy.

Rankin discussed these issues with Pete at the EQV eating club. At the time, all students took their meals in eating clubs; there were no university-run cafeterias. Jackets and ties were obligatory at dinners, which frequently were followed by the singing of college songs. Although Pete was a member of Alpha Delta Phi, he joined the EQV eating club for several months after the late Stuart Byron '62 argued in an eloquent speech that Pete's growing intellectual and political interests made him a good fit for EQV.

Rankin recalls Pete as "mature, good-humored, and approachable." He enjoyed conversations with him and said that Pete "had a special knack for making people feel positive about themselves.

"I remember well my discussions with Pete and John Sommer '63 [who also joined IVS in Vietnam]," he says. "I am certain they were well aware of the insurgency before they signed on with IVS. And I remember how casual they seemed to be over their involvement. For me the danger seemed obvious, and I marveled at their evident idealism and commitment."

JUNE OF 1963 WAS THE MONTH IN WHICH

the saffron-robed Buddhist monk, Thich Quang Duc, immolated himself in Saigon. In that same month Pete attended an IVS orientation program in Washington, D.C. Founded in 1953 by Mennonites, Brethrens, and Quakers, the non-profit agency had sent its first contingent of volunteers to Vietnam in 1958 for agricultural and rural development projects. Their work was so successful that IVS became the prototype for the Peace Corps. International Voluntary Services was to become the largest nongovernmental organization in Vietnam, at one point fielding 200 volunteers in Vietnam and Laos. It offered young college graduates who were committed to serving others the opportunity to travel overseas and participate in humanitarian work. Most members of the team lived side-by-side with Vietnamese, learning the language and customs.

Following orientation, Pete left for Vietnam and the provincial capital of My Tho in the Mekong Delta for more training. An outstanding language student who had studied Mandarin at Wesleyan, he excelled in learning Vietnamese during his initial month in the country.

Soon, he was barhopping in Saigon, as Jill described in a story she wrote for the *Washington Post Magazine* in March 2007. “There were run-ins with a self-important Major Cook and complaints about his IVS housemate, an agriculture graduate from Tennessee whose specialties were chickens, pigs, and their attendant parasites and diseases.

“Phan Rang, his home base, reminded him of the landscape of Oklahoma, where we’d moved during Pete’s college years: ‘flat, dry, sandy, hot and scrubby looking.’ He liked riding on the tailgate of a Land Rover for the breeze and the view. He didn’t say he was homesick, but he missed American desserts. ‘How do you make a pie crust, and what’s the basic formula for making the filling using berries or fruits, or lemon meringue?’ he asked. ‘All we have for dessert over here is fruit, fruit, fruit.’”

Like his IVS teammates, he spent most of his time far from Saigon. His mechanical aptitude, which he had picked up from his father, an airplane pilot and former crop duster, served him well as he worked to help villagers improve their agricultural practices. He developed a particular knack for building sturdy windmills that were much in demand.

“In only one letter did Pete speak seriously and directly about his safety,” Jill said. On August 25, 1964, he wrote to me: ‘You don’t need to worry about my security over here. It sounds much worse in American newspapers than it is in my province. Our province here is quite peaceful,

and the people are very friendly, even though we can see guerrilla croplands on the mountainsides at the end of our airstrip.’”

That peacefulness was not destined to last. A coup d’état in Saigon in November 1963 resulted in the capture and execution of President Diem and his brother Nhu. The political instability that followed, plus the rising level of Viet Cong activity, set the stage for a greater American involvement. By early 1965, U.S. ground troops had begun to arrive.

Pete was also writing to a young woman he had dated while he was at Wesleyan. Her letters from him, which Jill obtained, reveal his awareness that the situation in Vietnam was deteriorating. “American morale is hitting new lows, which disgusts me,” he wrote in October of 1964. “Of course, Vietnamese morale is just that much worse. Most everybody thinks all hell is going to break loose before the U.S. elections, and most people are taking the easy way out—blaming it on the Vietnamese and not hoping for anything better than negotiations.”

A new IVS colleague stationed with him, a Cornell graduate, arrived with hand grenades, a Thompson submachine gun, and plenty of ammunition. Pete said he felt “rather country squire-ish, armed only with my modest automatic rifle.” He had taken the roof off his Land Rover to give himself a clear field of fire.

Sommer, Pete’s Wesleyan classmate and fellow IVSer, later co-authored a book about his experiences titled *Viet Nam: The Unheard Voices*. In it he notes that by 1965, IVSers were becoming more concerned about the trend of the war.

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Privately, they argued that the United States should take a more assertive role in fighting the Viet Cong and in leading the army of South Vietnam, which was proving notoriously reluctant to engage the enemy.

“Such suggestions, born out of desperation, were to prove embarrassing when we found out how wrong they were,” he wrote. “At the time, however, an answer to a worsening situation had to be found. As individuals committed to the development of Vietnam, we did not like to see our work destroyed.”

In spite of the security problems, Pete’s exuberance and humor shine through his letters. He described a ride back to his home base: “A beautiful clear day with the wind moaning in the pine trees. On the descent, we could see over Phan Rang plain all the way to the coast. The clouds scudded over and their shadows seemed to race us down the mountain. It was sort of a wild ride because we lost time on the curves, but it was wonderful and exhilarating.”

In another letter he confesses that while trying to perfect an overhand towel snap (“as opposed to the common underhanded snap known in locker rooms throughout the world”), he had snagged the ceiling fan, causing enough of a load on the voltage regulator to shut down the house electrical system.

For the Vietnamese people, he had admiration and affection. He describes a trip to a summer youth program in Phan Rang. “People were glad to see me back. It was such a good feeling. They were eager to begin their projects—repairing a road, digging a well, repainting a school—but they didn’t have the support of the province chief. It was a great feeling to be the ‘key to turn the lock’ in such a situation.”

By then Pete had left his “peaceful province.” He had been promoted to a regional team leader stationed in the Mekong Delta. His routine now included travel to visit other IVSers and their projects.

For all their visibility among the Vietnamese populace and their lack of military protection, no IVSer had been killed by Viet Cong. That fact may have provided a false sense of security. Or perhaps Pete, adventuresome and at home with the Vietnamese, who dubbed him Mr. Tall American or Mr. Big Nose, may have been reluctant to acknowledge the risk for what it was. Regardless, in November of 1965, he passed a military convoy in the Mekong Delta and encountered a Viet Cong ambush up the road. The convoy arrived soon after to find him dead, riddled with five bullets to his head and another 10 to his body.

Jill believes that the Viet Cong did not target Pete, that he simply happened along at the wrong moment. He had not followed a particular plan of travel, so his movements would have been hard to track. The road, moreover, was long and straight; the Viet Cong could have seen him coming and might have believed that he was associated with the convoy behind him, which was returning from a battle and the likely target of the ambush.

His death was a huge shock to the IVS community and awoke them to the need for better security. “Our earlier blithe nonchalance about the war was deeply shaken,” Sommer wrote. “Vietnamese friends were equally distressed. Since we were always much influenced by the attitudes of the Vietnamese with whom we lived and worked, we noted their shifts carefully. Some, of course, stiffened in their hatred of the Viet Cong. Others came to resent Americans.”

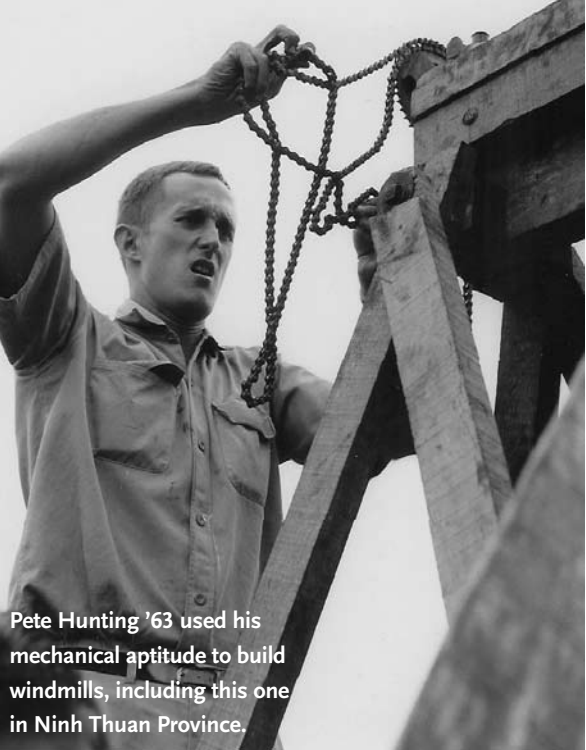
As fighting intensified, he says, villagers who had once opened their doors to IVSers and jokingly offered to find them wives would go inside when the young Americans came.

Pete’s death touched a nerve among Vietnamese. Jessica Breitenreicher Elkind, an assistant professor of history at San Francisco State University who has extensively studied the history of NGOs in Vietnam, says that Vietnamese who worked most closely with IVSers had good relationships with the volunteers. “There are a number of examples of meaningful cooperation between Vietnamese and IVSers, and some evidence that many Vietnamese people felt grateful for the assistance they believed IVSers provided.

“However, there is also evidence of Vietnamese (and I suspect many of these people had little or no direct contact with IVSers) who harbored feelings of suspicion, distrust, or even resentment toward IVS and other American organizations.” She attributes these feelings to a perception that Americans, including IVSers, advanced the agenda and policies of the unpopular Diem government.

Within two years, many in IVS concluded that their efforts were being compromised by the American military mission. A meeting over the Fourth of July weekend in 1967 of 70 volunteers (out of 160 in the country) at the IVS house near Saigon’s airport produced impassioned disagreement about the value of continuing the IVS mission. Subsequently, 49 IVSers signed a letter to President Lyndon Johnson that condemned the harm being done to Vietnamese people. Four of the staff leaders resigned to protest the war.

“Some of us feel that we can no longer justify our staying,” wrote the signatories, “for often we are



Pete Hunting '63 used his mechanical aptitude to build windmills, including this one in Ninh Thuan Province.

CAN IDEALISTIC YOUNG VOLUNTEERS DO GOOD WORKS IN A WAR ZONE, OR DOES THE LARGER MILITARY MISSION HOPELESSLY TAINT THEIR EFFORTS?

misinterpreted as representatives of American policy.”

An IVS delegation attempted, unsuccessfully, to present the letter to U.S. Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker. They then made the letter public to the *New York Times*, which published it the next day on page one. The letter produced invitations to testify before the Senate Subcommittee on Refugees, as well as many private meetings on Capitol Hill.

Sommer says the letter also yielded an outpouring of support among Vietnamese, including an eloquent letter from a Vietnamese individual studying in the United States: “The right place to find out a solution for Vietnam is not in Saigon. It is here, in America, with the awakening of a deep, true love for human beings, a realistic view of the world relationship today.” A Vietnamese teacher in the Mekong Delta told an IVS worker, “Now we know you are not CIA.”

The relationship between IVS and American authorities was conflicted. Although IVS had been founded by religious

groups dedicated to peace—and work with IVS was an acceptable alternative to military service for conscientious objectors—the organization relied on government contracts for its work in Vietnam. In particular, the U.S. Agency for International Development tried to incorporate IVS into pacification efforts.

Though IVSers may have suffered from guilt by being American, Sommer asserts that, “We went out of our way to eschew any contact with the CIA in order to avoid problems of that particularly hazardous type of association.”

Would Pete have been able to say the same thing? One of his Alpha Delt senior year roommates was Bill Owens '63, who recalled that Pete waved a letter not long before graduation, saying that it was a job offer from the CIA. Owens thought it likely that the offer was for a desk job based on Pete’s language skills. Regardless, Jill believes firmly that Pete became imbued with the culture of IVS and, like his close friend Sommer, would have refrained from contacts that could have put his IVS mission at risk.

Had Pete survived the attack, Jill believes he might have stayed in Vietnam. He was dedicated and enthusiastic. The work with IVS was a powerful and transformative experience. Many IVSers remained in Vietnam for years and went on to development-related careers. Sommer, for example, subsequently held positions with the Ford Foundation, the Peace Corps, and USAID. Though often frustrating, he says his time with IVS was deeply rewarding and that he has always been glad that he did it.

In 1974 he made a return visit to Vietnam. He found that a number of schools started by IVS were still functioning.

“Introducing tribal people to education had a lasting impact,” he says. “IVS made a lot of good friends.”

By the time IVS left Vietnam in 1971, having fielded 400 volunteers, nine had been killed in either Laos or Vietnam, and two had been captured during the 1968 Tet Offensive. They were held for five years as POWs.

Pete went to Vietnam with a sense of idealism about what could be accomplished by Americans of good will in troubled regions of the world. Still to come was the disillusionment we associate with Vietnam, the heartbreak of lives lost in a war that gained momentum even as it lost its rationale.

“Pete was part of an idealistic and hopeful moment in our history,” says Jill. “In a way, his death symbolized the passing of that moment. I think many of us who endured that war have lamented ever since what was lost, and asked ourselves whether any of it can be recovered. I was lucky. I got something of Pete back.”

COURTESY OF JILL HUNTING