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# War Child

## By David McNeill

*Over 35 years since returning home from the Vietnam War, a former US soldier has returned a poignant diary he recovered from a young Vietcong military doctor. The diary has sparked a patriotic revival in Vietnam, turning the two former enemies into national heroes.*

"I had to do an appendix operation without enough medicine. Only a few tubes of Novocain, but the wounded young soldier never cried out or yelled. He continued to smile to encourage me. Looking at the forced smile on his dry lips, knowing his fatigue, I felt so sorry for him…I lightly stroked his hair. I would like to say to him: 'Patients like you who I cannot cure cause me the most sorrow, and their memory will not fade.'"

So begins the diary of Dang Thuy Tram, an army doctor who fought Americans in the Vietnam War and died defending her hospital from a US attack. Since its reemergence this year after 35 years in the hands of a US veteran, the diary has become a phenomenon, selling over 300,000 copies, generating numerous translations and a television show, and sparking a wave of patriotic nostalgia among young Vietnamese.

Those who have read it say it is the most compelling, honest account yet of a conflict that killed an estimated two to three million Vietnamese and other Asians, as well as 58,000 Americans. "She was my enemy but her words would break your heart," says Fred Whitehurst, the ex-soldier who saved the diary from the incinerator. "She is a Vietnamese Anne Frank. I know this diary will go everywhere on planet earth."

The daughter of a prosperous family of doctors, Dang volunteered for duty in a military hospital in the killing fields of Quang Ngai Province in central Vietnam in 1967. The diary begins there the following April, just after the Tet Offensive; a turning point that convinced many Americans that the war against the Communists was un-winnable, and an event that was instrumental in forcing Lyndon Johnson to abandon plans to run for a second term. Nevertheless, President Richard Nixon would widen the war by the 1970 attack on Cambodia and it would not end until 1975.

As the bombing edged closer to her hospital, the diary records the mounting horrors that Dang witnessed in prose that is by turns worldly, compassionate, and enraged. Worn out treating badly wounded comrades with aspirin and bandages, she writes in June 1970: "The dog Nixon is foolish and crazy as he widens the war...How hateful it is! We are all humans, but some are so cruel as to want the blood of others to water their gold tree." In another entry, she writes "death was so close" as the bombing "stripped the trees bare" and "tore houses to pieces."

Shortly before she died at age 27, that same month, bombs killed five of her patients. Dang helped move the remaining patients and staff to safety and fought an American ground unit as it approached the now deserted hospital. "She was shot in the forehead," says Whitehurst. "She was told to surrender but laid down a field of fire. She was killed protecting her patients and nurses, fending off the heavily armed US Army with an old Chinese SKS single-shot rifle."

As a 22-year-old intelligence officer, Whitehurst's job was to review recovered enemy documents; he was about to burn Dang's apparently worthless diary – 'about the size of a pack of cigarettes' -- when his translator stopped him: 'Don't burn this one Fred, it already has fire in it.' "I was so moved that he respected his enemy that much that I kept it," says Whitehurst, who later had it and several other diaries translated. "It was obvious to me that this was a very beautiful person. I thought: I've got to get this back to her family."

So began a remarkable journey that ended this year when Whitehurst was welcomed by the family of his old enemy 'like a son' and feted as a national celebrity in Vietnam.

A less likely candidate for a project of reconciliation would be hard to find. Whitehurst was, by his own admission, the gung-ho son of a military family who, unlike many drafted US soldiers, volunteered to fight the Vietnamese Communists. “I’m a loyal American and I was raised in a very strict military family. I believed in the Domino Theory [which held that if one country came under the influence of communism, others would follow like dominos, unless stopped.] Well it didn’t happen.”

Whitehurst says his respect for authority began to disintegrate in Vietnam and was destroyed during his subsequent career as an FBI chemist, which ended when he exposed corruption and malpractice in, among other investigations, the 1993 World Trade Center bombing. The uber-patriot became one of America’s most celebrated whistleblowers. “The FBI HQ is like something out of an old movie about the Soviet Union,” he wrote afterwards. “Everybody is terrified to breathe.”

His bitter fight with the FBI cleared a path for the publication of the diaries. “My desire all these years was to get the words back to her family, her country. Beyond this blasted thing called government there is humanity and damn it if there isn’t we’re all going to hell. Maybe I could publish a book and use any funds for some good, you know? But the FBI wouldn’t allow its agents to collaborate with communists. In the end I didn’t give a damn about the FBI.”

Now working as a lawyer, Whitehurst showed the diaries to his brother Robert, also a Vietnam Veteran who had married a Vietnamese. Robert became ‘obsessed’ with the diaries and returning to Vietnam, but like many vets, Fred was terrified of going back. “I had a lot of issues when I came home. I saw and did a lot of crap,” he says. “The memories left me crying and upset and for five years I screamed in my sleep all the time.”

The brothers took the diaries to a conference on the Vietnam War at Texas Tech University in March this year, where they met Ted Englemann, another vet looking for what he calls ‘closure’ to the war and who was traveling to Hanoi the following month. He made digital copies of the diaries and with the aid of local Quakers, tracked down Dang’s family, including her 81-year-old mother. By the time the Whitehurst brothers visited the family this summer the diaries had been published and Fred and Dr. Dang were famous.

Initially fearful of what was waiting for them Fred Whitehurst was astonished at the welcome they received. “We did to Hanoi what the Germans did to London in World War II. We were the invaders, for whatever reason. But the nation embraced us. The prime minister met us and thanked us. As for the family, their father went into shock after his daughter’s death from which he never recovered and that burdened the family enormously. They loved their daughter so much and still adopted me. I was treated better there than I was by my own country.”

The diary has since caused a sensation, with everyone from the legendary General Vo Nguyen Giap, who led the Vietnamese resistance from the 1940s until the liberation of Saigon in 1975, to current Prime Minister Phan van Khai having read it. Whitehurst was interviewed on state television and said the diary “belongs to the world.” Asked to explain why he would fall in love with an enemy soldier, “I said the tears on your face are the same as the tears on mine. We all cry together.”

Although not the first Vietnam War diary, many Vietnamese say Dang’s account has struck a chord with young people because it comes raw with human emotions and unvarnished by government propaganda.

Dang’s diary records the passage from the lovelorn teenager who desperately misses the mysterious ‘M’ to earnest revolutionary. Recalling the words of ‘Uncle Ho’ [Vietnam communist leader Ho Chi Minh] and Lenin, she writes, “The revolutionary is a person with a heart very rich and filled with love,” adding, “I am that way already.” “She writes the truth about her feelings, and despite everything she loved people,” says Nguyen Duc Tinh, a radio announcer from Hanoi. “It comes straight from her heart. I think a lot of young Vietnamese are impressed at the way she was ready to sacrifice her life. I hope people around the world will read it to understand the truth about the Vietnam War.”

The last entry in the diary, written days before Dang was shot, is unbearably poignant: “I am grown up and already strong in the face of hardships, but at this minute why do I want so much a mother’s hand to care for me, or really the hand of a close friend, or just that of a person I know who is all right? Please come to me and hold my hand when I am so lonely, love me and give me strength to travel all the hard sections of the road ahead...”

The youngest Dang sibling, Kim Tram, is fielding requests to publish the diary in English, Japanese, Korean, Chinese and French. Next month she will travel to the US with her mother to finally pick up her sister’s diaries from an archive in the Texas Tech University. Just 14 when her sister died, she remembers her as ‘gentle and fragile.’ “I never imagined how hard and dangerous her life was. I was not surprised to know her longing for our parents, for our home in Hanoi. But now I’ve read her words I can sense her loneliness.”

Kim Tram says she is ‘grateful’ to have met Fred Whitehurst. “I consider him a kind hearted and honest man with a mind of great depth. I really respect him. And like him.”

And the man who held onto the diaries for all those years wonders how much the world has changed since. “I know that an Iraqi mother will one day be in the same position as Mother Dang. Why are we in Iraq? I don’t know. You can’t know the vulgarity of war until you’ve been there, until you’ve been splattered with your friend’s blood.”

*Fred Whitehurst bio and picture available here: http://citypages.com/databank/25/1244/article12539.asp*

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