

Checks payable to: VSO or VinhSon Orphanage

A Humanitarian Non-profit Approved by IRS Code 501(c)(3) & California Section 23701D

P.O. Box 9322 Auburn, California 95604-9322 - Email: info@FriendsofVSO.org -Web: www.FriendsofVSO.org

The Road Once Followed - A Return to Vinh Son

Series by Bart Ruud - VSO Board Member

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Vietnam, even for a veteran of the long-ago conflict that US forces engaged in, is a land of intrigue. Its indigenous people, its scenic beauty, the culture and many other qualities combine to draw one back.

In late October I returned to California from my third post-war visit. But even before I boarded my homeward flight, an inkling of thought passed through my mind: My October trip would not be my last.

Why? Why return again and again? Two thoughts come to

mind. One centers on healing from the sorrow of war. A second thought is wrapped around the children and caregivers at the Vinh Son orphanages where **Friends of Vinh Son Orphanages (FVSO)** has accomplished so much but continues to seek improvements and an even better return on our benefactors' investment in the children. From my perspective, there is no better means to understand the culture of the country and the nuances of orphanage operation than to put a boot on the ground in Kontum.

Our benefactors range from grade school age to those in their nineties. Our Board Members cross gender and generational lines, yet all come together to give the children of Vinh Son a better future. As a Board Member, it has been my privilege to serve you and to now share a few observations gleaned from my recent visit to Kontum.



Living at Full Speed Bart Ruud

It is an inspiration to see the nuns, caregivers and orphanage visitors from countries around the world work together to provide every child with loving care every day. While many benefactors will never really sense the intensity of 200 children living together, as at Vinh Son 1, it is fair to suggest that their community is at once interesting, or more appropriately said, fascinating, because it rarely stops moving. Ho Chi Minh City never stops moving but who would expect a city of perhaps nine million to ever slow? The analogy is that within the confines of an orphanage housing 200 children that offers classroom learning, agricultural production of food crops, animal husbandry activities

centering on hogs and cattle, music lessons on electronic organs, sewing lessons, bread-making and meal preparation, near constant motion is guaranteed. The pace of living hardly slows until late in the evening before again picking up the tempo at dawn. (And this occurs at the other Vinh Son sites that serve about 250 more children.)

As a farm boy who raised cows and calves for decades, I know cows transplanted from California to Kontum would be hard-pressed to adapt to the local forage and grazing conditions. The cows tended by the Vietnamese would have a far easier time adapting to California pastures. In the same context, we westerners would likely have to work

side by side with the Catholic nuns and other caregivers if we were to eek so much from a dollar. Their native wit marks their intelligence, work ethic, resilience and passion in a manner that is inspirational. I wish every benefactor could see and live the challenges that are met every day with no sign of despair. The children's smiles and laughter are proof that their needs are met at an extraordinary level.

Do operational obstacles exist at Vinh Son orphanages? Of course they do. Some we cannot overcome because of geographic issues. Lowland flooding during the monsoon which prevents cropping the ground during periods of rainfall is an example of an issue which we can only tolerate.

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VinhSon Facts

- Population - more than 500 Montagnard children in four facilities
- Administered by the Sisters of the Miraculous Medal
- Location - Kontum, Vietnam in the Central Highlands
- About \$12 feeds, shelters, and educates one child for a month

That same rainfall and flooding, however, very likely contributes to groundwater contamination of water wells, but in this case, modern technology properly applied can result in potable water

being available for domestic needs. On-site personnel and Board Members from afar can collaborate and resolve this kind of issue. For every problem, it may take only native wit, innovation, passion

and a willingness to invest in manual labor to improve the situation. In addition, it takes funding, and that is where our benefactors become so relevant.

Winning Through Investing Bart Ruud

While I was visiting Vinh Son 1, nine weaner pigs were purchased for 5,000,000 dong, roughly \$310. In Vietnam, where a receptionist at a three-star hotel in a large city earns \$60 a month, \$310 is a staggering capital investment in 20-pound hogs. In six months, however, those same piglets will have reached market size and will be sold for slaughter with the return on investment being several times more than the combined initial outlay and cost of production. Those funds will help defray operational costs, and youngsters involved in the daily care of the pigs are actively learning husbandry skills that will give them a fu-

ture in an agrarian culture. Everyone wins but the pig.

Another investment made by the Board has been in sewing machines. At Vinh Son 1, approximately 30 older girls are learning skills such as pattern-making and sewing. The resultant items of clothing are used both within the orphanage and some articles are sold within the community at large. The sewing program is innovative and everyone wins.

Youthful bread makers also are learning a tangible skill that can take them further in life when they reach adulthood. When FVSO rebuilt the bakery that had been destroyed by fire, I doubt the



(eggs in this photo to the left)

Board Members realized that bread would be made both for consumption at the orphanage and that a

limited amount of bread might be sold in Kontum. An anecdotal point is that Vinh Son 1 claims its bread is tastier than the bread made at Vinh Son 2. Either way, the bakery is another win-win project undertaken by the FVSO Board.

Collaboration Paying Huge Dividends Bart Ruud

In July 2008 we provided supplemental funding on a four-month trial basis to the orphanages which permitted purchase of meat, fish and vegetables to augment the children's diets. We did this at the suggestion of Dr. Berdy, a visiting physician from Toledo, Ohio who found high levels of anemia among the children and insufficient nutrient and protein components in the food served. As a result of the supplemental funding provided, the Sisters have been able to add eggs, meat, fish and vegetables to what is regularly served. My observation during my visit was that the children were healthier and experiencing fewer colds or other problems. Our supplemental food program, a team effort with **Friends of the Central Highlands (FoCH)** has been quite successful and should be continued. All site managers pleaded with me that FVSO continue this pro-

ject.

In collaboration with **FoCH** we provided half the funding necessary to bring visiting **East Meets West Foundation** dentists and dental technicians to Kontum during the period October 20 - 25. Our \$2,500 outlay was an extreme value as over 780 children from the orphanage sites and from surrounding hamlets and villages were tended to by the five dentists volunteering their service. This **East Meets West Foundation** visit broke new ground as local and Provincial government officials saw the value of a non-profit coming in and providing much needed dental care. My feeling is there will be less resistance in the future toward other non-profits, including FVSO, to provide medical assistance and other services. When I left Kontum, it was my understanding that the **East Meets West Foundation** dental project has already been scheduled for a return

visit in November 2009. My recommendation is that we again work in partnership with **FoCH** and **East Meets West** principals to fund this project.



Going Forward Bart Ruud

What lies ahead? As always, provision of basic needs of rice, baby formula, milk powder, flour for bread, supplemental purchase of eggs, fish, meat and vegetables to assure better balanced meals, fuel for the tractors at Vinh Son 1 and Vinh Son 4, the provision of dental and medical care, and even the purchase of mosquito nets to reduce the likelihood of malarial infection are projects that should be continued.

The prospect of a new deep well to replace or augment three dug wells at Vinh Son 2 will be considered in the future. As it stands, only one existing well provides water thought to be potable. An encased deep well would eliminate surface contamination issues and perhaps assure an ongoing and reliable supply of water.

At Vinh Son 3, monies allocated for food are sometimes utilized instead for funding repair of bicycles that are ridden four or five kilometers to school. There is no fund for bicycle tires, tubes, brake pads or other repairs. While this is not an expensive proposition, it is something that might be

considered as means to offset compromising the funding supplied for food. In addition, a tractor, trailer and plow, together with funding for diesel fuel could be a project that should be given careful consideration. At present, the Vinh Son 4 tractor, jointly purchased with **Colour4Kids**, is occasionally borrowed for use in the fields. When it is borrowed, the plow at Vinh Son 1 is also borrowed. Means to till the fields and rice paddies with a tractor and to haul firewood in a trailer would make life easier and increase productivity by freeing up labor for other tasks. A plow for a Vinh Son 3 tractor could be used at Vinh Son 4 and the logistics of establishing joint use would be greatly simplified. Somewhere in the future, an oven in which to bake bread might be a consideration at Vinh Son 3. In the present, they do not have bread, nor can they afford to buy bread.

Vinh Son 4 has pressing needs and will garner some attention as time passes. This rural site sits within a region where conservative political constraints apparently stymie progress. Sister Lieng is a woman with incredible courage, energy, vision and hope. She is an inspirational

woman who exudes extraordinary sensitivity and passion in a manner that truly touches one's heart. Her needs include roofing materials for the dining structure, which literally is a pole barn, school desks, diesel fuel for the tractor, a structure within which to raise pigs, and of course the kitchen which has previously been approved but which is yet to be constructed because local government officials have not acted on issuing a building permit. Sister Lieng hopes that progress in this regard can be anticipated in the coming weeks. As an organization, we can only work to understand Sister's ambitions and to understand that we have no legitimate right to dictate how the local community conducts its affairs.

In a related manner, the recent **East Meets West Foundation** dental clinic that served the children of Vinh Son 4 was well received and endorsed by local officials. This kind of acceptance of outside help may well serve to enhance understanding that **FVSO** assistance is not something to shirk. The success of one non-profit might well serve to open doors, and that is a strong hope.

You Make the Difference Bart Ruud

Overall, my four-day visit in Kontum provided much insight, solidified bonds with orphanage principals, and most importantly, gave me first-hand knowledge that what we have done and what we project for the future is well-founded. The children of Vinh Son are living infinitely better lives as a result of our interest in their welfare. We could not be so successful without two things – the passion of their caregivers, and the generosity of our many benefactors. As a charitable non-profit organization, we're making a difference every day. Our goals are humanitarian to the core and we thank all who assist

us.

Just a reminder, we are currently conducting our Annual Fund Drive and Veterans Matching Challenge. We need your help to continue improving the lives of these wonderful children.

Donations may be sent to:

FVSO

P.O. Box 9322

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Or online at:

<http://www.friendsofvso.org/sitepages/donate.html>

