

Checks payable to: VSO or VinhSon Orphanage

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He Rode for the Children Bill Sladek's Return to Vietnam

Story by Marion and Mike Little



Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things that you didn't do than by the ones you did do. So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover.
-- Mark Twain

Always choose the road less traveled, my dear friends, for there you, too, will encounter renewed life and hope.

- Bill Sladek

Soldier, Lutheran pastor, devoted husband, humanitarian: Bill Sladek's life has come full circle. Once a hero in combat, today Bill is a hero in life.

Bill returned to Vietnam last month for the first time since the war. Just as in prior tours, he had his orders and a mission that he would execute to the best of his ability; but that was where the similarities would end. This time, Bill had cut the orders himself and planned the mission. This time, he set the objectives and looked forward to each moment in-country. This time, Bill arrived with open arms, contrition in his heart, and a desire to mend wounds that he had carried on his soul for 4 long decades.

Bill wrote frequent emails to fam-

ily and friends at home as he traveled through Vietnam. One message told of a chance meeting that formed a new friendship: a friend he might have recognized once as "the enemy." Several more shared tales of daring exploits he won't soon forget, yet all of the messages conveyed how he was feeling. Collectively, his correspondence forms a journal that chronicles his healing process. Rev (as he likes to be called) would write at the end of his first day, "I simply love this land, this people," and his appreciation would only grow from that point.

I've become quite addicted to Vietnamese coffee, and I drink it the way the Vietnamese do...strong with a dollop of heavy cream...Yum!!

A few months prior to his departure, Rev's local newspaper published a story about him. The article told the small Colorado town about Bill's plans to ride a motorbike from Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon) to Hue, and that it was his fondest wish to somehow bring aid to orphans he found along the way. FVSO Board members read the article and promptly introduced themselves. The last piece of the puz-

zle had fallen into place and "Ride for the Children" became the focal point of Rev's trip. Cruising the Vietnamese countryside on a bright-yellow Russian Minsk to advocate for and build awareness of the needs at Vinh Son, Bill's ride took him steadily northward.

And what a ride it was! As a decorated veteran, Bill knows a thing or two about bravery. Navigating Vietnam's teeming highways and byways, however, demands a bravery that made his time as a door gunner almost seem preferable. As far as Bill was concerned, it was probably safer to be above the road with a gun, than on it with a motorbike.

Imagine, if you will, riding a motorcycle in your city. There are maybe 8 lanes of traffic, 4 in each direction. Except for the rare stop light, it's no holds barred. There are NO rules. You think you can ride a bike...you can't. You think you can handle people crossing over in front of you as others pass you and even others cross in front of you from all sides...you can't. Sidewalks are not off limits, either. There is one rule, however, and it tells a lot about the Vietnamese psyche: don't get hit and DON'T HIT ANYONE! I bumped a few

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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

bikes, which brought me some angry looks; though no harm was done, stalled a dozen times, even did my best to take out a construction site. I was white-knuckled all the way, but made it through HCMC with just a few scratches...



Bill's adventure began in Ho Chi Minh City, took him north to Bao Loc, on to majestic Dalat, continuing to Buon Me Thuat, until finally arriving in Kontum on December 1st. Despite a number of setbacks that included everything from poor travel conditions and accommodations, to injuries and aggravated health problems, Rev continued the mission with a broad smile and an open spirit.

I have to pinch myself because it's all so surreal at times. But I'm here, I'm changing in ways I couldn't imagine.

I'm so blessed to have this opportunity to grow a little as a human being and to experience this loving land, these loving people, this home away from home.

When he arrived at Vinh Son, Rev indeed found all that he had been searching for. The story of his epiphany is life affirming and should be told in his words:

From the moment I stepped off the motorbike, I was embraced with love and smiles. When I first walked into the nursery, all the children yelled "Santa Claus!" Now, there's an overstatement if I ever heard one. Almost immediately, this little girl ran up to me and threw herself up into my embrace. I held that little child and thanked God, knowing full well that it was my special moment



We were walking through a boy's dormitory where I saw a little boy, no older than five or six weeks, not able to open his eyes because he was gripped by a severe fever. I laid my hands on this little one's head, felt the fever raging from within his little body, and I knew that God had brought me to this helpless child. He needed expensive medicine, and the good sisters didn't have the funds, so I chose to help. The local pharmacy eventually delivered 35 pounds of medication that will enhance and heal the lives of many children.

Bill returned the next day:

A Mat's skin color has returned, replacing the dead grey pallor I had seen the day before, the fever was gone, and his eyes were wide and bright. I literally had been a part - albeit a small part - of a miracle. As the three of us embraced, there were no tears, only the sound of laughter filling the room, filtering downstairs to other rooms and spilling out into the courtyard. I had found my little boy . . . or should I say, he had found me. I would be A Mat's American father, and I would cherish him as a son to the end of my days.

Rev had wanted to visit the other Vinh Son sites, but his escalating health problems proved to be an insurmountable barrier. "I've seen the elephant, that moment in one's journey where you can't go on." During his brief time at the orphanage, however, he was moved enough to ask his wife how they might become "mother and father" to little boy who "found him." The brave soldier from long ago had acted honorably in service yet again

When that girl hugged me, when I felt that little boy struggling for life, when I saw and felt the love of the sisters and staff, I knew that I had been awarded in much deeper ways than pieces of ribbon and metal.

Sadly, Bill was forced to cut his trip short. In no way has that dispelled his optimism for the days ahead or for the gratitude he feels towards all who extended a helping hand along the road. FVSO deeply appreciates what Bill has done, as do the children and caregivers at Vinh Son. Reports from them indicate his smile was infectious, his caring obvious, and his dedication endless. Ride on, Rev, and get well soon.

I was befriended at every turn, loved, and thanked for making the arduous journey to be with them. I will always look back on my "Ride for the Children" with a deep sense of pride. How wonderful to know that an old man with a bad heart can overcome seemingly insurmountable odds when so many surround him with love.

Donations to "Ride for the Children" can still be made to Friends of Vinh Son (FVSO) on Bill's behalf.

