

**Ken Steiner ('68)** served with International Voluntary Services from 1968-70 in Laos, working in agricultural extension, community development, and refugee relief operations. He later pursued graduate studies at Ball State University and the Merom School of Lay Ministry, and is currently a Sales Engineer for Enprotech Mechanical Services in the North and South Carolina and Mexico regions. Ken is a licensed minister for pulpit supply in the United Church of Christ and has served various terms on the Cross United Church of Christ Consistory, as well as serving on the board of directors of the Indiana-Kentucky Conference of United Church of Christ, the United Church Board for World Ministries (executive member 2 years), and Heifer Project International. He is a member of Society of Manufacturing Engineers and an amateur astronomer. He is married to Deb ('70), who teaches music, and they have two children: Angie (a civil engineer) and Eric (a student at Purdue University).

## **My Tour in Indochina**

by Ken Steiner

The Indo-China War and our responses to that moral and ethical dilemma severely tested the consciousness of a whole generation of students. Ours was a struggle of how to respond to such a challenge in a way that was a meaningful witness to our Faith and Philosophy.

I was a conscientious objector during a time in our country when dissent was equated with treason. "My Country, right or wrong" and "America, Love it or Leave it" were phrases in vogue. Many young men faced the prospect of serving in the armed forces in a war that they viewed as morally wrong. The press dealt only with the events of protest, never delving into the reasons for the conscientious objector position. This article will try to relate the response of one young man's struggle of conscience to the challenge of the Indo-China War.

During my years growing up on an Indiana farm, I had not heard much about conscientious objectors. I vaguely remembered people mention that the state park had been built by "war resisters" during WWII, and they were by that time held in respectable esteem, though I wasn't sure who they were or what their reasons were for being "war resisters."

My entry into Manchester College was a rude awakening into the whole issue of war and peace. From my home community, loyal Americans without question answered the call of their draft board in the time of war. Peace demonstrators were considered misguided stooges led by the communists in our country, dedicated to bringing down our way of life.

I remember being exposed to debates in speech class concerning this strange position of "pacifist." It seemed to me that pacifism was very naïve and not practical in the least. But yet, the idea was intriguing and persisted, not letting go of me during my entire college career.

Little did I know at the time that Manchester would have the major role in preparing me for my future service as a conscientious objector. Asian History, which I studied under Dr. Eldon Burke, fascinated me and opened up a whole new world that I had never realized. I began to question and dig for answers in order to understand the conflict that was rapidly plunging my country into conflict. Philosophy class under Ken Brown further sharpened my sensitivities to the issue of responding to the dilemma of the Indo-China War.

Fellow students had a major impact, among them Rudy Sprinkle, Fred Tackett, and John Flory. They were part of the “peace community” at Manchester, a group in which I was never actively involved. I was still suspicious of people who had what seemed to be such radical ideas. However, from a distance I observed and learned from them. The options faced by young men at this time of history were the following: regular military service, safe haven in a national guard unit, escape to Canada, non-combatant (medic), service as a conscientious objector (finding alternative service), or refuse to cooperate with the selective service system. One of my classmates, John Flory, elected to be a non-cooperator and ended up serving time in Federal Prison as a price for his witness. To this day I have the deepest respect and admiration for John’s powerful witness. In the debate on campus, there was always the question: “What do you do about a Hitler?” or “How would you respond to the bombing of Pearl Harbor?” I finally came to the conclusion that I could not answer for those situations: That was my parent’s dilemma, but this was my war and I had to respond to this situation.

The course that I finally chose was to pursue alternative service, as a conscientious objector, refusing to be a part of the military service. It was ironic that after my years of struggle, being challenged by the draft board, and finally achieving the conscientious objector status, my grandmother came up to me, related how proud she was of me, and stated that my Grandfather had been a conscientious objector during World War I! I had not known! My grandfather had been killed in a hunting accident when my father was 5 years old, and I had never heard the story of my grandfather’s service. What a moral support that would have been during my years of struggle.

My alternative service was with International Voluntary Services (IVS) in Laos. IVS along with BVS was the model on which the US Peace Corps was formed. In 1951 negotiations to establish IVS involved the following organizations: Mennonite Central Committee, Brethren Service Commission, American Friends Service Committee, National Service Board for

Religious Objectors, and the US State Department. An agreement was reached at that time that IVS would be recognized as one of the accepted alternatives for conscientious objectors.

Heifer Project International provided several thousand chicks and IVS supplied the volunteers for one of the first projects involving IVS. Another IVS contract was a village life improvement project in Iraq in 1953. Dr. Eldon Burke, my Asian History teacher, was the team leader for that project.

The Peace Corps connection occurred when Senator Hubert Humphrey visited Vietnam and Laos to investigate US foreign aid. They met IVS volunteers and reported:

The committee's pleased to report the discovery of a group of young American agriculture college graduates, living along side the Vietnamese and Laotians and teaching basic agriculture.... The cost of this entire program has not been as much as a single mile of recently completed highway. It is to such projects as this that the study committee gives its heartiest approval.

When Senator Humphrey abandoned the presidential race against John Kennedy, he encouraged Kennedy to pursue the Youth Corps proposal, which then gave rise to the US Peace Corps.

Laos appealed to me because of the books by Dr. Tom Dooley that I had read while in junior high school. Dooley became one of my heroes. It was a thrill to walk the same Laotian streets and meet in person people from those pages.

When I joined IVS in 1968, IVS was subcontracted to the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). IVS was a private group but still considered quasi-governmental due to the close ties with USAID, and so to the US Government. This provided us with a good support base for our work but it also implied a liability of close association with the US government policy. That close association made IVSers in the field prime targets for the Pathet Lao (Laotian Communist Guerrillas). IVS was well-suited for Vietnam and Laos for a sobering reason, namely, the death of an IVS volunteer would not generate the negative press that would be associated with the death of a Peace Corps worker. There were only about 150 volunteers with families to identify with an IVSer's death, but every community of the nation would have families touched by the death of a Peace Corps volunteer. In short, we were expendable.

IVS was an avenue of service that tested us in the most difficult and harshest ways imaginable. My “peace position” was deliberately thrust into a war situation that would severely test my beliefs and witness.

In Laos, I worked as an agriculturalist in rice production. During the 1960’s new varieties of hybrid rice were being developed to enable farmers to increase their yields and to grow crops in the dry season with irrigation. I was involved in extension work, educating farmers about the new cultural practices required to produce the new hybrid rice varieties. While the increased production was very significant, it did come at a cost of additional outside commodity inputs.

I also worked with livestock production, fish pond production, community development projects, and had extensive involvement with refugee relief operations. Part of my effort involved the cross breeding of chicks that had superior meat and egg production while still being able to survive the local environment. I would trade the villagers my fertilized eggs for their eggs; and they would in turn put the cross-fertilized eggs with their sitting hens. Their dignity was preserved because they traded me their eggs for my eggs.

Another of my livestock projects was improved swine production. I would lend a boar to the farmers to breed their sows. The resulting cross-bred animal had better meat production while still being able to survive the local environment. My predecessor had obtained a Berkshire boar from Bangkok and had named the various animals. In my monthly report, I stated in my biological terms: “JAM is at the far end of the valley contributing to the genetic pool of the local swine population.” An unscheduled visit by my supervisor revealed to me that “JAM” stood for Joseph A. Mendenhall, the chief of the USAID mission in Vientienne, Laos! The whole bureaucracy in Vientienne had a hilarious laugh at the mission director’s expense.

I worked and lived at the village level with Laotian as my working language. My first two stations were part of the Forward Area program — areas that were remote and targeted for intensive development. In my first duty station I was part of a two-man team located approximately 45 minutes by air from the next American. We normally received one Air America plane per week for mail and supplies. I was involved not only in rice production but also in staging rice air drops to refugee settlements in our general area.

Since there were relatively few Americans in Laos, I had a wide range of working and social contacts, including people at the village level, members of the Royal Family, military, diplomatic

corps, and members of the Central Intelligence Agency. This experience provided me with a depth and breath of experience that few people are privileged to have.

One of the most interesting aspects of my experience was the realization of the interconnectedness between our Christian faith and our US culture. The civil religion as preached by Jerry Falwell and others was certainly in sharp contrast to the experience I had of faith and spirituality in Laos. The very dangerous idea that one group of people is “chosen” and others are therefore “un-chosen” becomes a cultural icon and forms the basis of continued hostility in the Middle East to this day. Falwell’s idea that US Christians are the “new chosen people” is in sharp contrast to the broader spiritual journey I experienced away from my homeland.

There was a high cost associated with being an IVSer in Laos. Three of my co-workers were assassinated by communist forces. They were singled out, no doubt in response to the horrendous bombing campaign that was being conducted in Laos. In a twist of irony when IVSer Chandler Edwards was killed, his girl friend was living next door to my girl friend, Deb Maurer, while both were serving in the Normal Patient Program at the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Maryland. It is amazing how big and small our world is at the same time.

In my second Forward Area, Muong Kassey, my partner and I were the objects of un-friendly military action that was foiled by a Laotian military patrol. During the day we watched from our front porch as Laotian planes bombed the suspected positions of the guerrilla forces. Later we evacuated, and waiting in my Vientiane mail box was a letter that stated: “as the fast-erupting events of the world are taking place around you, you are in danger of losing your front seat vantage point. Your *Newsweek* subscription is running out.” I simply cried. During the day, the attention of the USAID officials was focused on extricating my partner and me from Muong Kassey; two other co-workers were assassinated in another part of the country.

I had been forced out of two Forward Areas and finished my tour of duty in Ban Houei Sai, a provincial capital in northwestern Laos at the heart of all the opium trade coming out of the Golden Triangle. Peace is at times a costly endeavor. We were young, idealistic, and perhaps a little overconfident that we could make a difference. But the distinguishing trait was that we were a group of young people willing to risk the convictions of our faith and idealism. It was an extremely intense experience — one in which I was keenly aware of the closeness of death, while also being intensely alive.

The experience in Laos has probably been the high point of my life. It has definitely influenced my perspective on culture and the Christian faith ever since. I found the return to the US, the “reverse culture shock,” to be much more difficult than the initial “culture shock” when going overseas. I remember that the shallow TV programming and the commercials seemed so trite. My experience in Laos was in sharp contrast to the material commercialism of my native culture.

Three months after my return, I married Deb Maurer, my college sweetheart. We have been blessed with two children, Angie and Eric.

In retrospect, Laos provided me an opportunity to learn and to put into action my faith and hope for a more humane world. How one gauges the success of that effort is difficult to measure. Maybe my generation was naïve in our dreams of changing the world, but my experience in Laos, with other IVSers, may well have made a difference to a villager in some remote corner of Indo-China. They learned that a few good people came in peace to teach and to learn. My Buddhist friends said that because of my living and working with them, I would gain great merit and would have much better position in my “next life.” Living and learning with others in their struggles is a worthy endeavor for any of us.

Laos — quite an adventure for an Indiana farm boy. Peace.

[the preceding was printed in the **Bulletin of the Peace Studies Institute 2001** at Manchester College, the issue was a collection of articles and clippings of how various members of Manchester College responded to the challenges of the Indo-China War]