Family reunion in Di Linh

How I found my lost cousin, Ted Studebaker

This cousin I never knew embodied the ideal lifestyle. I even wrote about him for one of my college essays on who has been the foremost hero in my life. So I was elated when I heard that there was going to be a class traveling to Vietnam. One aspect of the 26-person trip was to visit Di Linh, in hopes of finding something of my cousin Ted Studebaker's life and death there.

BY JOEL ULRICH

I want to understand war. Everyone talks about it. It seems like a phenomenon that destroys so many people's lives and leaves nothing in its place.

But war is a funny concept for young people in the United States under the age of 23, such as me. We have never directly experienced it. All my generation has are books, movies, pictures, and stories of those who have gone through war in the past. This has created a major conflict that plagues my consciousness. If I cannot understand global war, how can I possibly fathom global peace?

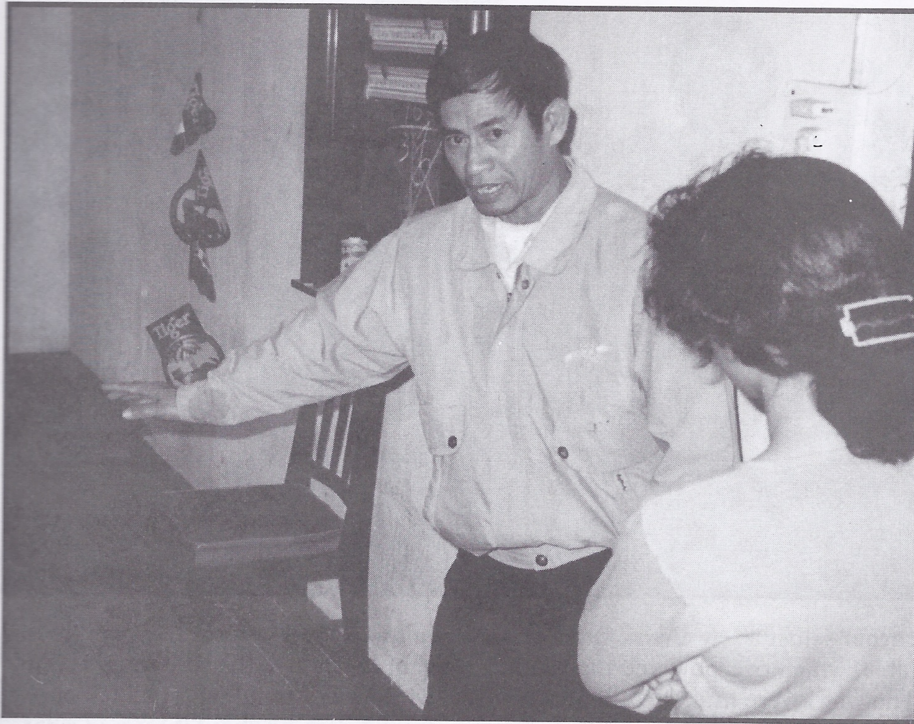
One such story of peace and war, with which many within the Church of the Brethren are familiar, is the life of Ted Studebaker. Ted, a graduate of Manchester College, declared himself a conscientious objector to the war in Vietnam. He had no hesitation, however, to entering South Vietnam in April 1969 as a participant in Vietnam Christian Service (VCS).

Ted chose VCS because of its service-oriented nature, a logical extension of his Church of the Brethren background. He worked in the village of Di Linh (pronounced Z Lin) with Koho refugees who had been displaced from the mountains. He worked to increase their rice efficiency, introduced fertilizers, helped establish an agricultural cooperative, and built chicken coops in bathtubs.

The old French hunting lodge *where Ted Studebaker and other VCS volunteers had lived is now a restaurant. Ted's room was on the lower right corner.*

For an American he had a wonderful rapport with the tribal people.

After his two-year term was completed, he decided to stay another year.



Khai Tran Van explains the circumstances *of the night that he saw Ted Studebaker on the floor of his room in the hunting lodge after being killed by the Viet Cong.*

He married another VCS volunteer from Hong Kong named Lee Ven Pak in a church in Di Linh, the service conducted in the Koho language. They had been married only a week when Ted was killed in the lodge where he lived by a Viet Cong insurrection. The Viet Cong were nationalist guerrilla groups fighting in South Vietnam against the government. Ted was, after all, an American, or "enemy," living among the local people.

Ted has special significance to me. He was my mother's second cousin (my great grandfather was the brother of Ted's father), and it would be hard to get through a Thanksgiving dinner at my grandparents' home in New Carlisle, Ohio, without mentioning something about Ted and the role that he represented: practicing nonviolence in the midst of violence. This cousin I never knew embodied the ideal lifestyle. I even wrote about Ted for one of my college essays on who has been the foremost hero in my life. And of course my book collection has a worn copy of the children's story by Joy Moore about the life of Ted Studebaker.

So I was elated when I heard that there was going to be a three-week class traveling to Vietnam in January, jointly sponsored by the University of La Verne and Manchester College, examining the American war in Vietnam from the Vietnamese perspective. One aspect of our 26-person trip was to visit Di Linh, in hopes of finding something of Ted's life and death there.

Then I found out that my wonderful cousin, Nick Studebaker, now a student at Manchester College, was also going. The new generation of family was seeking out the old. I wanted Ted Studebaker to help me understand what war is. What it is like to die. And what peace is.

I arrived at Di Linh with very little expectation of recovering anything substantial. We didn't know how to get to the lodge where he had stayed. We received word from someone who had visited Di Linh a few years back that the town was very different now from what it had been in the 1970s.

Indeed, town landscape in Vietnam has drastically changed since the late 1980s when Vietnam moved to a market economy while retaining its Communist one-party rule. Moreover it has been only four years since the United States completely waived its trade embargo against Vietnam, a country which was then and still is today one of the poorest in the world.

So with the advent of the change to the market economy, roadside stands selling everything from rice to paint brushes to helicopters made out of Coca Cola cans are pervasive. We had been told that a market now existed in place of the old French hunting lodge where Ted had stayed.

Other things made it unlikely that we would find any trace of Ted's history. For some reason, everyone had thought someone else would bring a picture of Ted, so we ended up with no photo to show people. We also didn't know his Vietnamese name. They probably didn't call him Ted, but rather some Vietnamese derivative. It may even have been a name in the Koho language. After all, everyone he lived and worked with were Koho refugees who were no longer living in Di Linh but had now returned to the mountains.

I envisioned our group arriving in Di Linh, getting out of the bus, taking pictures of some random street, and saying, "Here is Di Linh. This is where Ted Studebaker lived and died." Then back on the bus and on we'd go.

We did have one lead: The hunting lodge was supposed to have stood about a hundred feet away from a church in the middle of the village, the same church where Ted and Ven Pak were married. So when we finally entered Di Linh, we stopped at a seemingly random church that we saw from our bus windows. Our guide, Hoang, got out of the bus, walked into the church, and we all waited in the bus in quiet fervor. After about 10 minutes, she came back with a small, old man who worked in the church.

"We got lucky!" Hoang exclaimed. She introduced us to Khai Tran Van (called Mr. Khai by our guide), who was a former radio operator for the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), or the south government's military. Speaking in broken English,

Joel Ulrich *(far left)* **and Nick Studebaker** *(far right) met two men who had known and worked with Ted Studebaker—Khai Tran Van (left), and K'rah Kaning (right).*

Mr. Khai told us that he had been asked by the AVRN to verify and document the murder of Ted Studebaker by the Viet Cong! Not only that, but he said that the old hunting lodge was indeed standing.

In a rural village it would be unusual to see close to 30 white people just walking down the street with cameras flashing, and for that reason he was worried that a large group of us might attract authorities. So he said that he would take only a few of us to see the lodge. It ended up that Nick; our guide; Randy Miller, a professor of photojournalism from La Verne; and I left the bus to walk down the street with Mr. Khai.

The hunting lodge, a two-story building on the slope of a hill, was now a family-owned restaurant. Out of a sense of obligation and respect, we all ordered some soft drinks and bottled water. After about 10 minutes, Mr. Khai asked the owner if we could see the rooms downstairs. The five of us went down, and Mr. Khai took us into a room in the left corner by the door. He then proceeded to point to different, now imaginary, parts of the room. "There was a bed here, in the corner."

When Mr. Khai had arrived that night, he saw Ted on the floor by the bed, unmoving. Ted's wife, Ven Pak, was lying beside him. At first Mr. Khai thought they were both dead, but in truth Ven Pak was just in complete shock from what had occurred and was holding Ted as hard as she could.

About 10 other officials were in the room, and there was blood all over the floor. Mr. Khai said that the "VC (Viet Cong) thought that Ted was CIA." They were afraid that he was an American spy and were nervous about how Ted was helping the Koho people.

The room had changed a lot. There was no longer any bed in the corner—just a few chairs and a pool table, which overpowered the room. The walls were littered with posters of beautiful European-looking women holding Tiger and Carlsburg beers in their hands. Things change in 30 years. But we got lucky, indeed.

While Mr. Khai had not known Ted personally, he knew an older Koho man in Di Linh who worked for the VCS with Ted. We walked down the street and met K'rah Kaning. "You are the cousins of Ted?" he exclaimed. Family relations are quite important in Vietnam, and both Mr. Khai and Mr. K'rah were very honored that two of Ted's cousins would come back to Di Linh to see where he lived.

Mr. K'rah had been a driver and translator for people in VCS who could not speak Vietnamese or Koho languages, although he commented that Ted could speak both quite well. They simply called him by his name, "Ted." He said that "Ted taught them to improve their lives . . . their health care . . . and how to have a good life. People loved him very much. The Koho people will always remember him, always remember the things he did for them."

Nick and I exchanged addresses with the two men. We took a Polaroid picture of the four of us and gave each of them a copy. I climbed back onto the bus, a little dazed from the experience. I hadn't expected this.

I realize now that as this account unfolded of how a relative of mine was shot to death in the very room in which I was standing, I had felt peaceful. Something about it seemed right. Not his death, of course, but the lifestyle that Ted had lived in this village, and the comments that we heard the men tell us about his life. Ted was speaking to Nick and me through these two men. "You can live a life like this," he was telling us. "I did."

I hope to never truly understand war and peace in the same manner as my cousin Ted Studebaker did. After this journey, though, I am confident that I can contribute something in my own way to the issue of war and peace. My generation and I prove that it is possible to go through life without being in a war. War is not an inevitable part of human history.

I left a little notebook-paper message for Ted on the floor where he died. I told him not to worry, that a new generation of social activists was continuing his work by following the example that he, and Jesus, and all other followers of nonviolence have set. Can we meet the standards that they have set for us? Or more importantly, do we dare try? As Ted ended all his letters . . . "Life is great. Yea!"

Joel Ulrich is a sophomore majoring in political science and Latin American development at Macalester College in St. Paul, Minn. He is a member of York Center Church of the Brethren, Lombard, Ill.