

A night of terror

Missionary recounts '68 Tet upheaval

By PATRICIA BROWNING

At 2 a.m. on Feb. 1, 1968 in a missionary camp in the central highlands of Vietnam the firecrackers were popping like a Chinese New Years celebration — then the invasion started.

This memorable night of noise and terror started the 1968 Tet offensive which occurred at Ban Me Thuot, 170 miles north of Saigon. The village was overrun by two battalions of Communist troops that struck towns from one end of South Vietnam to the other.

Six American missionaries were killed in the attacks including the Rev. Robert Zeimer. His wife, Marie, told the Herald-Journal of the circumstances surrounding the incident.

Mission Wiped Out

"Our people were well established but the entire mission was wiped out in one night," she began. The first home to be bombed was occupied by Carolyn Griswald and her father, both formerly of White Plains. When this happened the Zeimers abandoned their house and moved to hidden quarters for protection.

That night Rev. Zeimer and a colleague, the Rev. C. Edward Thompson, decided to approach the Viet Cong to see if they could move the wounded into the mission hospital. Mrs. Zeimer reports she heard shots and was not surprised to

see her husband dead when she rushed outside.

In the onslaught she was wounded and held captive by the Viet Cong in the mission with three other Americans.

Drifting into consciousness off and on throughout the day she recalls, "I thought I was dying and going to heaven." Suddenly the Cong forced her out of the bunker in the middle of the night for questioning. "My white hair saved me," she said. "They respect age."

It was not until Mrs. Zeimer was evacuated to Nhatrang military hospital that her wounds were dressed. Of the 18 shrapnel wounds she received only one became seriously infected. However, she did suffer permanent damage to her hearing as a result of the exploding grenades.

The Rev. and Mrs. Zeimer first went to Vietnam 23 years ago to preach the gospel. "We believe that Christ is the truth and the light," the widow said.

Studied Tribal Dialect

The couple moved to Ban Me Thout, the provincial capital of Vietnam's central highlands to study Rada, a tribal dialect. There they trained native Vietnamese in a Bible school and cared for patients in the mission's leprosarium.

Thirty or 40 people of the Rada tribe assisted the missionaries. Converting them from paganism to a belief in Christian philosophy was a demanding job. Mrs. Zeimer explained, "We taught them by

comparing their blood sacrifices to the sacrifice of Christ on the cross." They even came to celebrate Christmas as we do, she said.

Translated Bible

Mr. Zeimer had devoted his life to translating the Bible into the Rada dialect. Parts of the New Testament had been translated into the Vietnamese language, but Zeimer's edition in Rada was a first. This translation was published by the British and Foreign Bible Society.

This work, for which Zeimer sacrificed his life, is sponsored by the Christian and Missionary Alliance. It is the largest Protestant missionary group in Vietnam and internationally headquartered in New York.

Morale High

Despite loss of life the morale of missionaries is reported high. Mrs. Zeimer's morale reflects this spirit. She said, "Guerrilla warfare is different. We realize that missionaries couldn't have done as much work as we have if the Allied troops hadn't been there. If they hadn't come over our church would have been stopped by the Communists." Her final comment was "mission work can't end."



Marie Zeimer, with her daughter, Miriam, who was attending missionary school in Malaysia during the 1969 Tet offensive. Mrs. Zeimer has another daughter, serving with her husband at a mission in Vietnam, and a son in the Navy.