



## **THE LAST WITNESS**

### ***Betty Olsen's fellow prisoner speaks of her courage***

By Michael Bengé

**Dr. Ardel Vietti, Carolyn Griswold, Ruth Thompson, Ruth Wilting and Betty Olsen.** You won't find their names on the Vietnam Memorial or on a grave marker at Arlington Cemetery. Yet, like thousands of other women, they went to Vietnam for the same reasons—a sense of duty, love of country, belief in God and an obligation to serve mankind. All five women were missionaries with The Christian and Missionary Alliance in Banmethuot, Vietnam.

The C&MA compound had been established in Banmethuot for several decades, and the missionaries' work at C&MA's leprosarium, located several kilometers below the town, was well known by both the Vietcong (VC) and the North Vietnamese (NVA). Many men from the American MACV unit and the 155 Aviation Assault Company stationed at Banmethuot attended Sunday morning services at the picturesque Montagnard church in the C&MA compound or afternoon services held by the missionaries at 155's compound. Afterward, the GIs were invited to the missionaries' homes for Sunday dinner and a chance to socialize, a relief from the daily grind of the Vietnam War. In turn, the GIs did what they could to help the Montagnards by contributing medicines and other materials to the leprosarium. (Montagnards is a term applied by the French to the Malayo-Polynesian and Mon-Khmer ethnic minorities who live in the mountains in Vietnam.)

Besides service as missionaries, these women shared another fate—they were all either captured or killed during the Vietnam War.

**Too Late!**



Betty Olsen

As an economic development officer with the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), I interacted frequently with both the missionaries and the military. I was responsible for the evacuation of civilians in case of emergencies. After rounding up most everyone else that Tuesday morning, January 30, 1968, I pulled up to the C&MA compound. Ruth Wilting, Betty Olsen and the others saw me and yelled, "Go back! Go back!" Too late! The missionaries watched as the NVA took me prisoner.

During intense bombardment and weapons fire, most of the men and women who served as C&MA missionaries at the compound were killed (only Marie Ziemer survived her severe wounds). Betty Olsen was taken alive.

About a week after my capture, I saw Betty and missionary linguist Hank Blood (from Wycliffe Bible Translators) being led in chains to a small cage made from wooden poles. We had little opportunity to converse— my cage was distant from theirs, and we were forbidden to talk. I had little opportunity to get to know Betty before our capture during the Tet Offensive, meeting her only by chance during my infrequent visits to church, the C&MA compound or the leprosarium. But Betty would save my life while we were prisoners of war.

### **Confronting the Captors**

Every month, we were moved to a new camp. We were given little food and survived mostly on a starchy root called cassava (a relative of tapioca), some salt and what edible leaves we could grab when our captors weren't looking. While in our second mountain camp, we came down with what we determined was dengue, with burning fevers, cold chills and bone-wrenching aches. It lasted about a week.

On the way to our next camp, I came down with cerebral malaria. I would be walking along and suddenly everything would turn a blinding white and I would pass out. I was delirious for the better part of five weeks and remember little other than Betty trying to wake me up so she could force me to eat, drink water or to clean me up. She berated the NVA for not giving me medicine and finally cajoled them into giving me rice gruel, which kept me alive. She was one brave and feisty lady!

In the latter part of June we were moved again, this time to a campsite near a large cave. It was the rainy season, and rather than sharing the cave with us, the NVA forced us to sleep on the ground in the open, with only a small piece of plastic for cover. We put Betty in the middle, and Hank and I were soaked most of the time. Hank came down with pneumonia, and Betty harangued the NVA for some medicine. Even though the NVA had a field hospital nearby, they refused, and Hank died.

Betty and I were both covered with pus-oozing sores from leech bites exacerbated by malnutrition. I showed her that by lying in a stream, we could let the minnows clean the sores, which would heal quicker. When we weren't picking lice out of our clothes and our minds weren't dwelling on food, Betty and I shared experiences. As the daughter of missionaries, she had led a pretty sparse life, but she had a vexing streak of rebellion. I promised her that when we were released, I would take her out for dinner at a restaurant of her choosing. She chose The Pit, a restaurant with red décor somewhere near Chicago. We would have sirloin steaks, with a little wine. Wine was verboten in her fundamentalist upbringing, but she reasoned that if Jesus could turn water into wine for a feast, it would be OK for her to drink some in moderation.

### **The Last Supper**

By November 1968, the lack of food and our constant moving had worn Betty down. One day, the NVA separated us, but by evening, we were reunited. Betty said they had kicked and dragged her the whole day, and she couldn't go on. I told the NVA officer-in-charge that we refused to go any further until Betty was given some good food and allowed to rest. They jacked shells into the chambers of their AKs and put them against our heads. They said that as civilians we were of no value as POWs and only took rice from the mouths of their soldiers. Betty's retort was that it was up to God, not them, to decide when we would die. It seemed to confuse them. They lowered their weapons and said we were crazy. We had called their bluff and thought we had won.

We were allowed to rest for a couple of days near a supply depot. The NVA prepared us a meal of rice, corn, mung beans and a little meat. Also, they cooked some bamboo shoots I had been allowed to gather. We were ravenous and wolfed down the food, noticing that the bamboo shoots were more bitter than usual.

It was meant to be our "last supper." Before we could finish, we had severe stomach cramps and dysentery. The soldiers had poisoned us by not boiling the bamboo twice to remove the cyanic acid.

Unable to get out of her hammock, Betty lay for three days in her own defecation before she died. They wouldn't even allow me to clean her up.

Miraculously, I survived, and for Betty I swore *Illegitimae non carborundum* —No, I wouldn't let the b\*\*\*\*rds grind me down! I helped bury Betty near the Cambodian border in South Vietnam in November 1968.

Several years ago, I was contacted by the Joint Task Force–Full Accounting in Hawaii and was told that Betty's gravesite had been found, but the Vietnamese have not yet released her remains. May she rest in peace!

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*Michael Bengé served in the Marine Corps from 1956 to 1959, achieving the rank of sergeant before being honorably discharged. He had been serving with the USAID for four years when he was captured by the North Vietnamese. After Betty Olsen's death, Bengé was held in extreme conditions for five more years. For his efforts in rescuing 11 USAID personnel before his capture, he received the U.S. State Department's highest award for heroism. He retired from USAID after nearly 45 years of service.*

### **Under Fire**

*Dr. Ardel Vietti had been the medical director of the C&MA leprosarium. She and two associates, Daniel Gerber (Mennonite Central Committee) and Rev. Archie Mitchell (C&MA), were captured by the Vietcong during an attack on the hospital in 1962 and were never heard from again.*

*Carolyn Griswold, a linguist and teacher, arrived in Banmethuot in 1953. Much of her time was spent preparing bilingual elementary school primers in the Raday and Vietnamese languages. At approximately 3:30 a.m. on Tuesday, January 30, 1968, Carolyn's house was blown up. Carolyn's father, Leon, was killed, and she lay gravely wounded in the rubble. On Friday, Carolyn was rescued by a 155 Aviation "dust off" and flown to the 8th Field Army Hospital in Nha Trang, where she died.*

*Ruth Thompson* was half of a husband-and-wife linguistic team who worked on the Mnong dialect. Ruth and *Ed* joined the group in Banmethuot after Prince Sihanouk closed Cambodia to U.S. missionaries. After Carolyn's dad was killed, the missionaries made several attempts, to no avail, to negotiate with the North Vietnamese (NVA), who had set up in the Montagnard church. The Thompsons' house was blown up at about 6:00 p.m. on Wednesday.

Somehow, the Thompsons managed to flee to a garbage pit that had been converted to a bunker. On Thursday morning, the remaining houses were destroyed, and the NVA rushed the bunker, shooting *Robert Ziemer* to death and throwing in grenades, killing the Thompsons.

*Ruth Wilting* was the fiancée of Dan Gerber, who had been captured in 1962. Besides her work as a nurse at the leprosarium, Ruth also taught midwifery classes for Raday women. She shared a house with *Betty Olsen* across the road from the main mission compound. During a lull in the fighting, Ruth and Betty darted across the road to help Carolyn and the other wounded. On Thursday morning she and Betty decided that Carolyn had to be taken to the hospital immediately. Betty ran toward a jeep but was stopped by the NVA and led away. Through a hail of fire, Ruth ran for the bunker, only to be killed with the Thompsons.

—Mike Bengé

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