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Probably wounded, Ruth Wilting ran for the bunker and threw herself in, repeating, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," as if she had something to apologize for, Marie Ziemer recalled.

The loudest sound

Above them, a soldier threw a grenade.

It was the loudest sound Marie Ziemer ever heard. Then silence. Her ears rang.

"This must be what it feels like to fly off to heaven," she thought, and wondered whom she would see first. She asked God to take care of the Thompsons' five young children and her own 14-year-old Miriam.

Painful shrapnel wounds shattered her illusion of death. She saw the bodies of Ruth Wilting, Ruth Thompson and Carl Thompson, who had been killed instantly. The M'Nong boy was mortally wounded.

"Let's get out of here," he pleaded.

"Pretend you're dead," she hissed.

But a Viet Cong soldier stuck his rifle into the bunker and ordered them to walk to a house across the street. Out of the corner of her eye she saw her husband's body, hanging from the clothesline where the force of the shots had blown him, a deep

gash in his chest.

In the Viet Cong house she saw that Betty Olsen had also been taken captive, along with Wycliffe missionaries Henry and Evangeline Blood and several M'Nong people.

"Can't we go see if Bob's alive?" she whispered to Olsen.

"No," the nurse whispered back. "He's dead."

Her hands were tied behind her back. The sizing in her new dress made it compress against her bloody body like a giant bandage. Evangeline Blood tore her petticoat into strips to make more bandages. During that day's battle more shrapnel struck her in the right arm.

As Ziemer drifted in and out of consciousness, Olsen forced her to eat the canned blueberries and uncooked rice their captors had provided.

Before dawn the next day, Friday, Feb. 2, the Viet Cong retreated from Banmethuot. They took Olsen and Henry Blood with them into the jungle. Ziemer was left behind with Evangeline Blood and the M'Nong.

With the help of two M'Nong men, she staggered to the hospital. As she painfully made her way over the rubble, she thanked God for her sturdy new shoes.

There was no medicine at the

hospital. A young doctor cleaned her 17 shrapnel wounds as best he could, while saying that he did not know where his wife was. She could barely hear him; both of her eardrums had burst.

American aid

American soldiers took her to the local Army headquarters. They had no medical supplies, either, but Army nurses gently washed four days of blood and filth from her hair, which made her feel a little better.

That afternoon she was evacuated to the U.S. Army field hospital at Nha Trang along with Carolyn Griswold, who soldiers had found still breathing four days after her house exploded. But two hours after they arrived at the hospital, she died of blood loss and internal injuries.

"She might have lived if we could have gotten her help right away," Marie Ziemer said.

The Ziemers' 24-year-old daughter, Beth, arrived. She had been rescued by Army helicopter from an embattled language school where she was preparing for mission service in Vietnam.

Counting blessings

Ziemer asked Beth for a pen and paper. Beth gave them to her,

thinking her mother wanted to write to her children about their father's death.

Instead — and for a sole moment as she told her story, Marie Ziemer's voice broke — "When I handed the paper back to Beth, she saw my list of blessings."

She had thanked God that he had saved her soul, that she had been married to a wonderful man for nearly 25 years and that she had three fine children. Still not certain that she would escape Vietnam alive, she asked God to watch over her children.

The Army expected an attack on the hospital, so she and Beth were evacuated again to a military hospital in Camrang Bay, then to Japan, to Washington, D.C., and

finally home to her late husband's hometown of Toledo, Ohio.

American soldiers recovered Bob Ziemer's body. She was released from a Toledo hospital long enough to attend his funeral there with their children.

Ruth Wilting and the Thompsons were buried in Banmethuot. A photograph shows two weary, young GIs standing respectfully before a fresh grave, marked by a makeshift wooden cross. Betty Olsen and Henry Blood died six months later of dysentery, still held captive in the jungle.

Alliance missionaries were evacuated from South Vietnam, but returned after the war. Beth and her husband served there until South Vietnam fell to the Communists in

1975. They now serve in Indonesia. The Ziemers' son, Tim, flew military helicopters in Vietnam and is now a commander in the Navy.

After her shrapnel wounds had healed, Marie Ziemer stayed in Toledo until Miriam was ready for college. Then, at Miriam's urging, she took a job at Alliance missionary headquarters in Nyack.

When she ponders her husband's death, Marie Ziemer said, she recalls that he nearly drowned at 21. The 28 years that he lived to serve God were a gift from the Lord, she said.

She quotes a New Testament verse, that all things work together for good when people love God and obey his will.

"I believe in the sovereignty of God," she said. "I shy away from the word 'tragedy.'"

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