

*Tour of Duty for the Lord:
The Experiences of WELS Chaplains in Vietnam*

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Platoon, Full Metal Jacket, Tour of Duty, China Beach. In the past few years, there has been renewed interest in the Vietnam war. People are flocking to movie houses or tuning their television sets, to catch a brief glimpse of what life was like in Vietnam during those years of war. But the only viewpoint they get from the screen is the military one. They only see what the soldier sees. They only experience what the soldier experiences.

What was it like to be a civilian over in Vietnam? What did they see? What did they experience? For a little while, let me take you back to Vietnam through the eyes of six men who served as WELS civilian chaplains during that time. They will speak of the difficulties, dangers, frustrations, and rewards of serving the Lord in a war zone. The information in this paper is gleaned from a series of six interviews I conducted with the former chaplains.

When ^{one} looks at the movies and television shows about the Vietnam war, and sees what those soldiers did, what they had to go through, and the terrible environment there, you do not think right away that there could be Wisconsin Synod soldiers in a place like that. But they were, by the hundreds. During 1967 & 1968, which were the peak years of the war, there were as many as six hundred to a thousand WELS soldiers in Vietnam. These were young men fighting and dying for their country, suffering the pangs of loneliness and despair, struggling with the many temptations that attack a

christian soldier, and needing and wanting to hear the word of God.

The Lord knew they were there and sent out a call. Seven brave men accepted the Lord's call to bring His word of peace to a soldier at war. These seven men were: Luther Voss, Erwin Scharf, Frederic Gilbert, Melvin Schwark, Waldemar Hoyer, Roland Ehlike, and Karl Otto. With the Lord's guidance, these seven chaplains carried out an extremely exciting, and rewarding ministry among the WELS soldiers in Vietnam.

As in traveling to any foreign country, preparations had to be made beforehand by the chaplains. This included getting immunization shots; twelve of them all together, which was none to pleasant for them.

There was also the matter of obtaining a visa in order to get into the country of Vietnam. This is where the red tape started. The United States government had made all kinds of concessions to the South Vietnamese government. Chaplain Gilbert explains, "Our government had made an agreement that no civilian clergy were to come into Vietnam. We came in on a traveler's visa which was good only for thirty days. Both of my predecessors (Voss & Scharf) were fined when they left the country, otherwise they could not get an exit permit." The South Vietnamese government did not want men coming into their country to evangelize the natives. Chaplain Scharf comments, "In order to get my visa I had to promise that I was not going to be evangelizing." This seems like a pretty drastic promise, but you must remember that their call was to serve WELS soldiers in Vietnam and they had to make such a promise or they could not go.

In order to prepare for this foreign society, Chaplain Schwark did a little extra work. "I spent two weeks in Thailand before going to Saigon. I did not know how I was going to work out in a society of different nationals in a war zone. So I wanted to go to Thailand first of all, because I wanted to acclimate myself to a foreign society in a friendly situation." Other chaplains also did work in Thailand; serving the soldiers at the large

air bases that were there.

The home base of operations for our chaplains was the capital city of South Vietnam, Saigon; now called Ho Chi Minh city. There were two different places where the chaplains resided. Scharf and Gilbert lived in a fairly new, but modest hotel called the Golden Building. This hotel was located right next to a brothel. The nine story hotel was a concrete structure which was helpful because vermin do not live well in a concrete building.

Even though the Golden Building was right next to a brothel, the hotel did a good job of keeping the prostitutes out. Chaplain Scharf made the observation, "The manager was a very fine man and was smart enough to know that if he kept his hotel as free as possible from prostitution, that he would have a good kind of customer." This is important to consider because the methods of prostitutes in Vietnam are nothing like what they are in the United States. The prostitutes would go into the hotels at night, and with the help of their brothers or boyfriends, would actually break into the hotel rooms and try to entice whoever was staying in the room. It could be quite an unnerving experience for a chaplain. Chaplain Scharf recalled one night, when he was staying at a hotel in a different city, how he had to barricade his door to keep the prostitutes from coming in.

After Chaplain Gilbert's tour, the place of residence moved to the guest house of the Christian Missionary Alliance people. The guest house was run by a Mr. & Mrs. Dutton, a missionary couple who were extremely helpful; the chaplains had nothing but high praise for them. Chaplain Otto said, "they prayed us in and prayed us out of the guest house." Chaplain Hoyer commented, "Living with Mr. & Mrs. Dutton kept us from eating the native foods." This was indeed a blessing for many of the chaplains!

Only a couple of the chaplains could stand to eat the native cuisine, the rest found it pretty abominable. The big problem was that the conditions

under which the food was prepared were downright filthy! The smell was terrible too. Chaplains Scharf and Gilbert could not eat at the Golden Building because of the filthy food. "If you went into a garbage recycling room, that is what the kitchen looked like," said Chaplain Gilbert.

Lucky for them, there were a few places they could go to get clean food. Chaplain Gilbert mentioned one, "Fortunately there was one fellow from the embassy that had a racket going. You bought a club membership from him and then you could eat at his restaurant. It had more slot machines than tables; but that food was clean." Chaplain Scharf spoke of a place he often frequented called The International House. Here they served American food and one could get a decent meal there. But when he did have to eat at a native establishment he played it safe. "When I did have to eat in a lunchroom, I won't say a restaurant, I would order a couple hard boiled eggs. I figured if they boiled them hard there could not be any germs on them."

To give you some idea of what the native food was like, Chaplain Gilbert describes one of their delicacies.

One of the delicacies there is to walk along the street and buy the head and neck of a roasted chicken. They roast those in trays and sell them like ice cream cones. The prize moment comes when you have cleaned off everything and just have the skull. You look for a rock or a piece of sidewalk and then crack open the skull and eat the brains. This is done by the finest of people.

Besides the food, there were other drawbacks to the culture. The city of Saigon was very dirty and smelled to the high heavens. There were no such things as garbage cans. Every block had its own rubbish heap where all the garbage was dumped. In the oppressive heat and humidity of that tropical climate, the waste would decay and rot very quickly. Once in a while a truck would come and haul some of it away but not often enough.

Further contributing to the terrible odor of the city was the fact that people would often use the sidewalk as their toilet; and privacy was of no concern to them. It was enough turn a chaplain's stomach as he was

walking to get some breakfast in the morning.

During the war, many refugees fled to Saigon because it was too dangerous to live in the small villages. This increased the congestion of an already crowded city, increased the smell, and caused even more hassles in the culture for our chaplains. One danger they had to watch out for was thieves. Chaplain Gilbert said, "Thievery, you would not believe it! All our jeeps came with a case hardened chain welded to the frame to lock the emergency brake. Yet, if a fellow had four hours, he would file through that in order to steal it."

Chaplain Gilbert was a victim of thieves himself; he had his watch stolen right off his wrist. He explained how the thieves would do it, "Some of the fellows would get a ring and have ^a knife blade on it. They would run alongside you and cut your watch right off your hand. If they miss they hit your artery and you stand there holding your artery."

Saigon was not a safe city to live in at this time. But didn't they have police? Sure they did but they were not too helpful. They were called "white mice" by the military because they wore white helmets and white shirts and would run away at the first sign of danger.

When you are a stranger in a foreign country, sometimes you just have to grin and bear it. "You learn to swallow things," said Chaplain Gilbert. "I remember one time I wanted some bananas for breakfast. A woman had some nice bananas. This woman evidently was North Vietnamese and she looked at me and spit at me. It isn't very pleasant! She would not sell me any bananas." Through all the difficulties though, the chaplains did find the culture interesting.

To sum it up in a nutshell, the main duty of our chaplains in Vietnam was to locate the soldiers, wherever they might be, and serve them with the means of grace. Every month the Spiritual Welfare Commission, now called the Special Ministries Board, would send the chaplains an updated list of

the names of the WELS soldiers currently serving in Vietnam, and their APO's (military address). The next step for the chaplains would be to try and make contact with these soldiers either by letter or telephone. Since the telephone system was atrocious, most of the contacting was done by mail.

The chaplains would send letters to the soldiers inviting them to attend services whenever they found themselves in Saigon on a Sunday. Most of the chaplains tried to be in Saigon every Sunday for services. The services were held in various locations. In the morning, many of the chaplains would have service right in their hotel room or apartment. On Sunday evening, a few held services at a French Reformed chapel across from the United States embassy. Chaplain Otto referred to it as the "homesick service." In addition, a few tried to have regular services at the Third Field Hospital near Saigon, and at a base in Long Binh.

To conduct a service, they improvised the best they could. Usually a service consisted of a little hymn singing, a sermonette, and celebration of the Lord's supper. Different chaplains were blessed with what they could use for music. Chaplain Scharf was given a tape player as a gift so he wrote to the music directors at the synod's colleges and seminary and they recorded some organ music and hymn singing and sent it to him. This allowed him to have a pretty realistic service there in his hotel room. Chaplain Ehlike was blessed with an organist when he had services at Long Binh. Some of the camp chapels even had Lutheran hymnals to use. Those chaplains who did not have the use of an organ or tapes would sing familiar hymns from memory.

Since the bulk of the soldiers were out in the field, much of the chaplain's time was spent visiting the soldiers at the various camps. Many of the soldiers would even write to the chaplains and ask them to come and see them.

Getting to the camps meant hitchhiking a ride on a military bus, plane,

or chopper. Securing transportation to the camps or bases was more difficult for some than others; it all depended on the particular privileges they were given. Chaplain Ehlke had full military privileges so he could go pretty much where he wanted to; unless it was too dangerous an area. Chaplain Otto said he had the rights of a senator or U.S. representative as an individual who was on a mission. Chaplain Hoyer stated concerning this,

We had an official document with us from Washington, D.C. The Air Force really approved and you might say sponsored our chaplaincy work and told all the base officers to respect my ministry and to make my ministry possible....I was given, after a few months, these invitational travel orders which meant that I could fly on any ships; C-125's or the choppers. Just line up at the base and show my credentials and I could go to any base in Vietnam.

Upon arriving at a camp, there were certain procedures they had to follow. The first stop was the office of the provost marshal, he was in charge of camp security, in order to clear things with him. If they would have just gone into the camp and started going from barracks to barracks looking for WELS soldiers, it would have looked suspicious since they were in civilian clothes. The next stop was to see the post chaplain to let him know they were there. Finally, they would locate the chaplain's assistant who would tell them in what barracks they could find their men. Chaplain Ehlke mentioned that these assistants were very helpful in getting PX and travel privileges. Chaplain Hoyer stated, "With my letter of recognition from the pentagon, I had no problems going into a base. I would show my credentials and the military chaplain's assistant would help me go through the list of my soldiers on the base. We would get them together for communion service."

There were no big crowds to minister to at these camps. The ministry at these places was basically one on one. Chaplain and soldier would get together in the soldier's tent or the platoon sergeant's room in his

barracks, or whatever place was handy; and talk about home, have a Bible study and communion. Chaplain Gilbert describes what a meeting like that would be like,

We would talk about things that pertain perhaps to his family, where he comes from, who is his pastor, maybe you know his pastor. These things are very important because they don't get to hear anything like this. Who else is there? You try to find a common ground to discuss things. Perhaps he will know of somebody else from our synod. If he is the only one from our synod, he will stick with you until you go back to the entrance and leave; because he is so happy. This is something from home.

Although many of the camps and bases had nice chapels, the WELS soldiers were not too anxious to go to them. Chaplain Scharf said, "They knew the atmosphere was wrong. They actually liked it better if they could come to my hotel room." What was preached by the military chaplains was also a drawback for the soldiers. One soldier made the comment, "I went there once and the preacher had as his theme, 'The comparison between civilian taxation and army spending.' I have never gone back there since. I did not think that that kind of sermon did my faith any good."

A WELS chaplain in Vietnam had no normal daily routine. From the information I gathered from the interviews I will give you a rough sketch of how the day was spent. First thing in the morning, they would go down to the post office and pick up whatever mail they had received. After returning to their room, they would answer any letters from soldiers in the field and try to set up meetings with them for a certain time and place. Any names of new soldiers they would also write to, letting them know they were in Saigon and inviting them for Sunday services, whenever they were in town. Time would then be spent setting up schedules as to where they wanted to go to meet soldiers; and then waiting for chopper rides, etc. There was also the need to do sermon work during the day. The Spiritual Welfare Commission also wanted a report on their activities so records had to be kept up to date. There were probably no two days the same for our Chaplains

in Vietnam.

Serving the Lord in a war zone, there was danger all around. The Vietnam war was guerilla warfare so there were no front lines; the fighting was everywhere. In reality, the chaplains were in danger all the time. But the Lord's guardian angels watched them closely and brought them safely through some close calls. Here are a few of their dangerous experiences:

Chaplain Ehlike went to a small base where four WELS soldiers were, "I talked to an officer and found out the base was completely surrounded by Viet-cong. I said what happens if they start to move on the base and he said, 'We're blown off the map.'"

Chaplain Scharf:

One time I flew up to Nha Trang. There was an old French hotel there. I told a lieutenant from Benton Harbor to make a reservation for me there. The boys knew that I didn't like the raucous entertainment that went on up in the front all night, and they put me back in room 8 in one of the back corners of the compound. I got to Nha Trang that day. They had a little check-in desk outside. There was an old lady taking care of it. I told her I had a room and would like to check-in. She shook her head and said, "Bombed." I said when, she said, "Midnight." I walked back to see what the attack amounted to and my room 8, where I would have been in sleeping, if I had got there the night before, was a hole in the ground.

On another occasion, while on a military bus headed for Bin huaa,

I jumped in and we started out towards Bin huaa. All of a sudden there was a young American officer feverishly hailing that bus for a ride. Now that was against the rules. The bus driver was not supposed to pick them up. They were to stop only at regular bus stops where the MP's took care of things. But this day the driver stopped and we were all mighty glad he did. We started up again and just a few rods down the road a bomb went off that was placed and timed for our bus. I don't think I would be talking here today if the fellow had not hailed that bus.

Chaplain Hoyer:

Perhaps the most dangerous thing we did was flying in choppers over enemy territory. We would often read of choppers that went down on similar flights that I had taken.

Chaplain Schwark:

I remember going up to Long Binh, that was a support base, and when I was there it was Epiphany night. Suddenly, the air raid sirens went off! I woke up and heard shrapnel hitting all the buildings! Being straight from the U.S. and only 2½ weeks in Vietnam, I decided I would get dressed and head out to a bunker, a protective area. When I got out there, the lieutenant just chewed me out; up one side and down the other. He said, "Listen, when you're over here and that siren goes off, you head for the bunker in your underwear! I would rather have a living person in his underwear than to have a corpse perfectly dressed."

Chaplain Gilbert:

It was interesting to go to Bin huaa for instance because you went through the old Michelin rubber plantations which were deserted and full of snipers. When the bus went through there, we all laid on the floor; because the bullets would whistle in. There was no glass anymore because it had been shot at so much. The bus driver wore a flack suit and had some extra sheets of metal that he put on the two sides of himself.

Chaplain Ehlike summed up the feelings of all the chaplains concerning the danger, when he said, "I don't think anyone who was over there ever thought anymore about any danger particularly than you do right here at home because you had job to do and you had people you wanted to see."

It should be pointed out that our seven men who went to Vietnam were civilian chaplains, not military ones. Our chaplains got along well with the military chaplains. Some of them were overwhelmingly helpful and thought that it was wonderful that the Wisconsin synod was sponsoring men in Vietnam. The two groups never got into any major hassles about fellowship principles or stepping on each other's toes. But not all the military chaplains were helpful to our men. Chaplain Schwark tells of one incident,

I went up to the MAC-VI chaplain's office and I got the coldest reception in the hottest country I had ever been in. The MAC-VI chaplain was Col. Hyatt and he told me in no uncertain terms I ought to jump on the next plane and head right back to the United States of America. I was kind of disappointed and I determined I was going to

spend my entire year there in Vietnam and I would be a success without him because the Lord was going to bless the work that I had agreed to do.

Many of the military chaplains even envied our chaplains. The government chaplains were confined to the base where they were stationed. Our men had the freedom to go where the soldiers were at. Chaplain Scharf tells of one government chaplain he talked with,

A Missouri Synod chaplain who I ran into, who while we were talking, actually broke down and cried. He said he wished he had a situation like mine where I could look up our own men and have our own service with them. They had to confine their preaching to social gospel. He said he was kept busy by just telling the fellows to behave themselves and keep clean. And the soldiers themselves knew that those were the things their officers told them and they didn't need a chaplain for that.

All in all, the military chaplains helped our seven ^{a great deal} _{men} in carrying out their ministries.

Being a pastor in a foreign land is tough enough, but when that country is also at war, it makes it all the more tougher and presents even more difficulties and frustrations. The men I talked with mentioned many difficult things about being a foreign chaplain. They talked of being uprooted after serving in a parish for many years, being so far away from family, the loneliness of being the only one of your kind in the whole country, and also the ever present threat of danger. Chaplain Ehlke said, "I started out being afraid of getting back safely. Then after a while the worry was finding a way there, where you wanted to go." There was also the difficulty of finding the soldiers. The soldiers never stayed in one place for very long and many were never visited at all.

The most difficult thing Chaplain Otto had to do was write a letter to the parents of a boy who had a drug problem:

I had to write a letter to a doctor back in the Milwaukee area, who was not a member of our church, but asked if I would please visit his son. I found his son at Long Binh, a drug treatment center. To try to figure out how to write this doctor, who was a christian gentleman, I didn't know

what to do. I remember visiting the boy, a young man who had got caught up with drugs. He said, "How you gonna tell my parents? Don't tell my mom but tell my dad." What a tremendous emotional experience.

Along with the difficulties, they also talked of the frustrations. There were the hassles of trying to get around using the military transportation, the filling out of forms upon forms. By far the biggest frustration for all the chaplains was not being able to get to see more soldiers. They were not able to contact all the people they would like to be in touch with.

When I asked them if they had any really disappointing experiences, I was surprised to hear that not any really stood ^{out} in their minds. The Lord truly blessed their ministries. Chaplain Hoyer summed up any disappointments very well when he said, "Most disappointing of all is that we finally did lose Vietnam to the Vietcong under communist control." People would not hear the gospel easily in South Vietnam anymore.

I am sure the chaplains would agree that the rewards the Lord gave to their work far outweighed any frustrations, difficulties, or disappointments. For all of the chaplains it was reward enough just to get a group together, in that crazy situation, to have a service. The amazing response to the means of grace that they would see from war weary soldiers filled their hearts with joy. Chaplain Schwark spoke of such a response from a soldier, "Captain Porter, who had been down in the delta region and was hit by shrapnel in his lip and broke some teeth. He said, 'I'm here today to worship God and thank God for the miracle I just experienced down in the delta region.' You see that kind of faith in a war zone." Chaplain Hoyer, "The most rewarding experience was to meet the fellow Wisconsin Synod Christians and have them attend our services. I saw how appreciative they were that their synod invested in a civilian chaplaincy."

A war time chaplain also makes many calls on soldiers in hospitals.

Ministering to those badly wounded and dying soldiers offered some very special rewards for two chaplains. Chaplain Hoyer remembers:

I did attend the death of a soldier that was wounded in Cambodia. He confessed to me that he had not attended church faithfully after his confirmation like many teenagers. As he reflected on his pastor's confirmation classes, he remembered that he had once said that his favorite hymn was "On Christ the Solid Rock I Stand, all other Ground is Sinking Sand." So I got the hymn book and read the entire hymn and saw the smile on his face. I gave him communion before he died. What a wonderful thing it was for me to write his pastor and parents of this wonderful confession he had made before his death.

Chaplain Ehlke recalls, "At the Third Field Hospital I ministered to a man hit by a mine. He was not able to speak; they had done a tracheotomy on him. The way he responded was with his eyes. You used some familiar Bible passage with him, 'For God so loved the world,' and his eyes would light up."

One reward the chaplains did not expect was the praise of the non-WELS people around them. "This I heard any number of times over there," said Chaplain Scharf. "Man you must belong to a real church, that pays its own bills, that has a man over here in this dangerous hole looking for their men." The work that these seven chaplains did for the Lord was certainly appreciated.

Some of the chaplains were married at the time they accepted the call to Vietnam. But Chaplain Ehlke's wife was the only wife that came over to Vietnam and stayed for any length of time with her husband. Mrs. Ehlke stayed for three months and occupied her time doing volunteer work at the Third Field Hospital. The rest of the chaplains did not even want their wives to come for any length of time because they said it was no place for a woman to be.

I thoroughly enjoyed talking with these men and I hope you also have enjoyed reading about what it was like to be a servant of the Lord in a

country ~~to~~ apart by war. Such a ministry was indeed exciting, difficult, extremely frustrating, and also rewarding. These brave men look upon the time they spent in Vietnam with great fondness and will always treasure the memories they have of their tour of duty for the Lord.

areas lend themselves to large-scale sugarcane cultivation. In some coastal flats there are large marine salt beds. In addition, the South China Sea and the Gulf of Thailand offer rich areas for fishing. The highlands contain valuable hardwood forests, and in some places the soils are suitable for the establishment of rubber, coffee, and tea plantations. Some of the cinnamon grown in the highlands is among the best in the world. Since 1955 truck gardening has become a major economic activity in the vicinity of Da Lat. There also is a potential for development of a cattle industry in the highlands.

Only one major hydroelectric project—at Da Nhim in the highlands—has been completed, but the war pre-

vented its capacity of 160,000 kilowatts from being fully utilized. The potential for exploitation of minerals is yet to be determined.

Manufacturing. The war affected manufacturing negatively, with a 52% decline between 1964 and 1970, marked by slowdowns in production of textiles, glass, ceramics, ethyl alcohol, sugarcane, pulp and paper, vegetable oils, natural silk, and coal. The production and sales in beer, soft drinks, tobacco, and canned foods that increased with the urban influx of population and the allied military presence will undoubtedly decline.

The economic and financial situation. Since 1966 the official rate of exchange has been 118 piastres to U.S. \$1

