July 2004 **7 Vietnam**

When we docked in Saigon harbour there was no one to meet us. The telegram we had sent had not arrived. We had little idea how we were going to sort out the porters screaming around us in Vietnamese or pig-French, how to get through customs, or how to tell a taxi driver where we needed to be taken.

Happily, our fellow-passenger was met by a diplomatic car with CD plates. Jean was able to go with her to the Wycliffe group house and return with colleagues for me. Mafeking can hardly have been more relieved than I was to see them.

The first five months we spent in learning Vietnamese. This was necessary before we could move up country and learn an unwritten language. We had printed conversations which we would be drilled in by a young Vietnamese man who then conversed with us using only the words we had learnt so far. It was an excellent introduction. Each Vietnamese word is one syllable, but each syllable may be pronounced on one or other of six different tones, each making a different word. For instance, the syllable ‘ma’ may mean ‘ghost’, ‘mother’, ‘but’, ‘grave’, ‘horse’ or ‘rice seedlings’ depending on the tune with which it is pronounced.

Vietnamese is written with the Roman alphabet (a, b, c . . .) with extra marks to indicate the tones, and is very simple to read. Not many Westerners learned the language, so the people responded eagerly when they found someone who did. As Dr. Samuel Johnson said of bears dancing and women preaching, ‘It is not that it is done well, but that it is done at all.’ We got to speak Vietnamese adequately, but not with great fluency.

Taxi drivers were particularly open when we spoke their language. One asked me whether Americans put another star on their flag when they came to Vietnam. (American soldiers were there as advisors at the time.) Another told me that it was all right under the French - they took your money and left you alone. A third, when he found I not only spoke Vietnamese but spoke his own Northern dialect, utterly refused to take any payment no matter how I urged him.

The Wycliffe group house in Saigon was quite crowded. We slept on an upstairs verandah with a roll-down bamboo blind to screen us from the street. One morning we woke to hear the usual pony carts taking vegetables and fruit to market - ‘Clip, clop, clip, clop.’ Then the carts were racing back the other way - ‘Clipclopclipclop!’ Shortly after that, in the street outside, a heavy machine gun opened up.

Our director opened the connecting door from his bedroom and suggested we crawl into the central part of the house, keeping our heads down. For me, that meant rolling off my side of the bed and crawling under it. Part of the Vietnamese army were staging a coup d’etat and attacking the Presidential Palace, just a few hundred yards away from us. The coup was quickly put down.

Towards the end of our Vietnamese language study our first child, Graham, was born. Shortly after, we moved up-country 180 miles northeast of Saigon to a refugee resettlement village. We were due to learn the Tho language (pronounced ‘toe’), spoken by 134,000 people between Hanoi and the Chinese border in North Vietnam. Refugees from this and other language groups had come south when the country was partitioned in 1954, so we were able to study the language in South Vietnam.

Initially we made our base in a small village called Nam Son, a couple of miles off the main Saigon to Dalat highway. The village chief was very friendly, and let us use the village hall, a wooden building with a corrugated iron roof sited next to his house. We set up our things at one end of this large barn. Children would wander in and watch, but they would stream out when they heard the village chief’s booming voice as he came near.

There were village stores in the rest of the hall, incense sticks and so on. We noticed rats making their way over these things. We even had rats running along the headboard of our bed, just outside the mosquito net. Something had to be done.

I went to the shops along the main road and bought two rat traps. They were like spring-loaded mouse traps, only with a steel base. We baited and set them. Within a couple of minutes both had gone off, and each had caught two rats side by side. We baited and set the traps over and over until we had to go to bed. In the three weeks in Nam Son we caught 66 rats. 65 of them were caught by trap - we found that you didn’t even need to bait them. The 66th fell into our water bucket during the night and drowned. I had filled up the kettle for tea before I discovered it - and then poured all the water out through a crack in the wooden floor.

With so many dead rats on our hands we wondered how to dispose of them. The chief’s wife assured us that all we had to do was to put them outside the front of the hall on a little mound, and they would be cleared up. They were - every few minutes. We marvelled at the efficiency of the refuse collection, until we watched to see what really happened. The children of the village were playing with dead rats, which they were drawing around by means of a piece of string tied to the tail. One child with an empty piece of string was waiting hopefully near the mound. From then on we found a different way of disposing of them.

We discovered that the people and their language in Nam Son were not Tho, but Nung. Many Nung men were paratroopers in the South Vietnamese army, thought to be implicated in the coup d’etat, and to home in on them could have looked suspicious. So we had to move from this village to the main road.

The township on the highway was (and is) called Tung Nghia (pronounced like ‘too near’ but with the

sound at the end of 'sing' instead of 'n'). This was a refugee resettlement town for White Thai, Black Thai, Chinese and Tho from the north. We were able to buy for £40 a house built with the cheaper slices of timber taken from the outside of logs (the rounded side on the outside of the house, the flat within). The thatch needed repairing, and we were able to nail laths inside to cover over the gaps so no one could peep through the walls.

The nearest town was Dalat, 18 miles away. I was once in the post office there when the man behind the counter explained to another customer that I lived in a 'villa' in Tung Nghia. 'Villa?' I exclaimed. 'It's just a thatched cottage!'

Like Vietnamese, Tho was a monosyllabic tonal language with six tones, slightly different from the tones of Vietnamese. The word for yes was 'mi' on a low falling tone, and the word for no was 'mi' on a high rising tone, so you really had to get the tune right. For the most part the same alphabet as Vietnamese would suffice, but a few extra signs were needed.

We thought it might take us quite some time before we were ready to begin translating the Bible. We came across a version of Mark's gospel in Tho which had been translated a number of years before. Our excitement was dimmed when we found that to the Tho people it was almost entirely incomprehensible. That made us think, 'Even we can do better than this.' So it proved to be the stimulus we needed to get started.

We had a regular procedure for translation. Jean and I would study the passage, gleaning what help we could from commentaries, and then try to phrase it as well as we could in Tho. When my translation helper came, I would tell him the story, sometimes even acting it out, and then get him to tell me it back. Those were wonderful days. We soaked ourselves so much in the chapters of Mark that it seemed sometimes as if Jesus was living out these things before my eyes.

Problems came in many different forms. Tho had no single word for 'brother', only words for 'elder brother' and 'younger sibling'. So each time the word 'brother' had to be translated we needed to consider which one was the older one.

John the Baptist ate locusts. I had the word for grasshopper, and remembered that locusts were distinguished by having shorter antennae, so I elicited the correct word. Feeling that my informant might think this was a strange diet, I tried to excuse John, saying that some people did eat them. 'They're delicious!' was the response.

One day my efforts at explaining what was going on were greeted with: 'No, that's not correct. That says he was walking on water and no one can do that.'

My helper asked one day in Vietnamese whether this book was a 'truyen co-tich'. The various parts of this phrase seemed to indicate that it meant an old story. So I said yes, it was. 'Ah,' he said, 'That's all right then. Anything can happen in a truyen co-tich.' Too late I discovered that the phrase meant 'legend'.

We were working together one day when someone appeared at the window (which had no glass). 'Prepare to greet the Chief of Province,' he announced, before shooting off on his bike. All very well, but where? Should we go to the main road? Or would he come to the house? I asked my language helper, and he was no clearer what had been meant, but he decided it was time for him to go. As we discussed the matter in our home dressed in our normal, informal clothes, who should appear outside but the Chief of Province. We apologised for our lack of formality, but he was totally relaxed and gracious with us.

We still had rats in our house in Tung Nghia. The traps regularly caught one or two. I noticed that sometimes the rats had fleas on them. When we arrived in Saigon for one of our periodic visits I had crushing headaches and spiking temperatures. After the doctor had put me through two courses of medicine for malaria he realised I had typhus and gave me the antibiotic that was specific for this. We also had bouts of infectious hepatitis.

A longer stay in Saigon was the time for us to help new workers with their Vietnamese course. During that time I also helped the Minister of the Interior with some English lessons.

The group in the Saigon house had finished breakfast and were praying together one morning when planes flew over very low, and we heard the 'Pu-wum' of napalm bombs. The director and I ran to the house of the American who coordinated security in the street. As we dashed into his tiled living room the planes came over again. When they had passed we found that we were crouched in opposite corners of the room. In the event, we had to tune in to Voice of America to find out who was fighting whom. The American-trained Vietnamese Air Force were practising their skills on the Presidential Palace, aiming for the President's sister who was much disliked.

The Americans were coming into the country in greater numbers about that time. They were supposedly there as 'advisors', but it seemed that they were increasingly involved in action. A commissary was opened in Saigon where soldiers and their wives could buy States-side food. Second-hand clothing was also available. Our American colleagues were allowed access. One of them heard two soldiers' wives discussing the clothing. One said, 'Look at that! Whoever would wear that?' The reply was, 'Oh, some of these missionaries might be glad of something like that.'

One time I hitch-hiked back to Saigon on a military DC3 (Dakota). When we arrived at Saigon airport there was a shuttle bus to take the Americans into town, with a Vietnamese driver. I discussed with him where

would be the best place to set me down, which would be the nearest to the street where the group house was. Since I spoke in Vietnamese, he diverted the whole bus full of Americans to drop me off at my street corner.

Throughout this time the Communist Viet Cong were carrying out attacks. They would come at dusk and occupy a town, then disappear into the jungle at daybreak. This happened to two towns each about 18 miles from us. When I was about to go to sleep the thought would come, 'What if it were here tonight? What if it were your wife and child?' Then I had to stir myself and commit my family again to the Lord, telling him that I was trusting him for what was to come.

Every so often I paid a courtesy visit to the District Chief. He was philosophical. He pointed to the edge of the jungle and said, 'They know I am here. They know all about me. They know I smoke Woodbines.'

Two Wycliffe couples were on their way to us by Landrover from Saigon. One couple lived in a town not far from us. As for the other couple, the wife was to stay with Jean whilst the husband went with me surveying an area for its translation needs. By late afternoon they had not arrived. I cycled to Dalat airport, a few miles from us, and phoned the group house in Saigon. They had encountered a Viet Cong ambush on the road. The men had been shot dead on the spot. One had been holding his baby, who was killed as well.

Our chief contact with the University of Saigon, a Vietnamese professor of linguistics who had trained in the States, was as shocked as any of us. He went to the Saigon group house to express his condolences and comfort to one of the widows, but whilst doing so he broke down and wept. It ended with the widow comforting him, and assuring him that because these men trusted Jesus as their Saviour, we would see them again.

I was asked to fly to Bombay to meet a Wycliffe colleague, Professor Ken Pike, who was coming from the States. We were to spend a couple of weeks visiting places in India to investigate the possibility of linguistic work there. We visited Deccan College in Poona, then flew to Delhi, and went by train via Lucknow to Gorakhpore, near to the border with Nepal. Our Indian hosts there took us to the tomb of Buddha, where there was an enormous statue of the Buddha lying on his side, the position in which he had died. We wanted to tell them of the One who not only died but rose again.

We flew back from Vietnam in April 1963, under the impression that it was necessary for us to return early because the linguistics course in England needed teaching staff.