

Program: My Two Years as a Surgeon in Vietnam

Speaker: Gilbert Herod, MD, past president, Methodist Hospital medical staff

Introduced by: John Peer

Attendance: 125

Guests: Janet Harris, Rodney Basson, Steve Tinsley, Debbie Lee

Scribe: John Peer

Editor: Bonnie Carter

Today's presenter was Gilbert Herod, MD. He is an Indiana native and graduated from Broad Ripple HS in 1954, Butler in '57, and Western Reserve Medical School in '61. In 1966 he completed his residency at Methodist and then served in Vietnam from 1966-68. In June 1970 he completed his thoracic surgery residency at the Univ. of Michigan. He was on the Methodist Hospital staff from 1970 to 2007 and served as president of the medical staff in 1996-98.

In the mid-1960s, every doctor below the age of 35 was faced with military service. Instead of joining the military for a war he did not believe in, Gil's brother suggested serving in Vietnamese civilian hospitals. This substituted for the two-year military obligation and served a valid need. After completing his residency at Methodist, he started working at the Da Nang Civil Hospital.

The staff was only three or four American doctors as the Vietnamese physicians were in the military. Conditions at the hospital were very poor with minimal staff and minimal supplies. Occasionally they received outdated blood from a US Military facility. In addition, the staff had to deal with all injuries without specialists.

He worked closely with students from the Hue Medical School, which they considered to be the Harvard of the East. They considered Ho Chi Minh of communist North Vietnam as their George Washington. This shocked Gil as Americans saw Ho Chi Minh as a communist and not a member of South Vietnam. However, from the local perspective Vietnam was always one country arbitrarily divided by the 1955 Geneva Accords. The West believed this was necessary to block the domino theory of advancing communism in Southeast Asia. This mis-information led to ever escalating commitments, starting with President Eisenhower, to establish two Vietnams when the local people never believed that concept. Even as the military involvement escalated, the Pentagon Papers confirmed that the highest levels of the US government knew the war could not be won and just did not know how to get out with dignity. In the end, it was a wasted effort costing the lives of 58000 Americans and over a million Vietnamese. Gil's point was that we got into this quagmire due to misinformation. And, a similar story, again based on mis-information, can be told of the 2nd Iraq war which has now led to the rise of ISIS.

The Da Nang hospital was very overcrowded and understaffed. One especially gruesome example was a quadriplegic who became so weak from bed sores that he could not swat flies away from his open sores. This affected the adjacent patients, so the nurses had no option but to remove the patient to the outdoors where a black cloud of flies essentially performed a very cruel euthanasia.

At one point Da Nang had 85 patients needing advanced orthopedic procedures. Gil found a staff of underutilized orthopedic surgeons at a nearby Marine hospital who were very willing to assist at Da Nang, if they could get a jeep for transportation twice a week. However, this win-win plan was denied by the four-star Marine general when he heard his surgeons had time available.

Ted Kennedy was visiting, and Gil requested help of at least crutches for the 85 non-walking patients. The Vietnamese approach was to build more concrete buildings to house these invalid patients. However, most of the cement was being stolen for the black market leaving the buildings so weak they would collapse with the slightest impact. Another lose-lose situation.

In another example of mis-information, a program to entice the Viet Cong to defect for effectively "40 acres and a mule" was initiated with orange posters saying, "Safe Passage." The program has some success in the south, but it was unsuccessful near the North Vietnam border, because whenever Marines saw someone carrying the soliciting orange poster, they shot them.

About this time Gil contracted hepatitis. He was flown to Clark Air Base in the Philippines (where his family was) to recover. It turned out he also had his second phase General Surgery Board examination upcoming. Through fortuitous circumstances he was able to study during recovery and get back to Portland, OR, to take (and pass) the exam.

In February 1968 the Tet Offensive was initiated and quickly overran Hue just north of Da Nang and near the North Vietnam border. Hue was a beautiful city and capital from 1802 to 1945. It was the intellectual and cultural capital with a beautiful architecture and culture. The Communist forces took over the north side of Hue and inflicted severe damage. They had assassinated 3 to 4 thousand including three humanitarian German doctors. Gil, as the most experienced surgeon who also spoke Vietnamese, was called to re-establish medical care at the abandoned Hue hospital on the south side of Hue. The large hospital was abandoned. He received his first patient the next day requiring an immediate C-section with no support and minimal supplies from Da Nang. Fortunately, both the baby and mother survived. It was at that moment that Gil realized that his skills were needed right there more than they would be at any future point in his life.

In the next few days, the local nurses returned to the Hue hospital so Gil could start some level of service. It turned out that tetanus was a common problem, mainly because the population had no immunity yet had many open wounds. Luckily, they lost only two patients.

In a special case, a mother whose baby was convulsing from tetanus and had already survived a major shrapnel injury, was begging Gil to treat her baby. Gil did not think the baby would survive another operation, but finally relented and removed a mass of dead tissue near her back. The baby did survive to the eternal gratefulness of the mother.

Gradually, the doctors returned, including Dr. Cuu, the highly respected head doctor. He was considered a traitor and would have been assassinated if found. They talked about religion, which was not frowned on there, and it turned out Dr. Cuu was a humanist, as is Gil. Gil said he feels most people are humanists but choose not to talk about it.

In June 1968 Gil returned, traveling East to West though Asia and Europe, to the University of Michigan to start a thoracic surgery residency.

As a postscript, back at Methodist Hospital in 1975, in a discussion with another Methodist surgeon, they both lamented that the whole Vietnam War was for nothing.

In a new chapter, during the late 1990s Gil and his wife wanted to adopt children and considered China but did not qualify. Instead they adopted Michael and Tommy from Vietnam, who are now entering college.

As a final note, Dr. Tran was a medical student of Gil's in Hue. He and his family escaped by boat after the Communists took over, relocating in Stockton, CA and had glorious reunion with Gil.



Dr. Gilbert Herod