

“Don't throw these in the fire, Fred. They have fire in them already.”

A Viet Nam veteran, photographer
and educator reflects back on his
intimate experiences with one book



by Ted Engelmann



Forty years ago, March 1968, I landed at perhaps the busiest airport in the world: Bien Hoa Air Base, Viet Nam.

As an Air Force Sergeant, I was assigned to a Forward Air Control (FAC) unit directing air strikes in support of the 3rd Brigade, 1st Infantry Division at the base camp of Lai Khe, some 60 km north of Bien Hoa. During my year tour of duty, I made nearly 400 slide images of the war machinery, the general life around me, and the Vietnamese culture.

It would be an understatement to say I had a negative experience in Viet Nam; yet at the same time there was something perversely positive about it. This is something many veterans, of many wars, might recount; but it was especially

true in Viet Nam. Today, you couldn't pay us enough to go through what we saw and did, yet, our experience was priceless.

After my discharge in December 1969, I worked as a veteran advocate and taught middle school and high school life science and earth science, psychology, and social studies. In 1979, I helped establish the Vietnam Veteran Outreach Program in Denver, Colorado, one of six pilot cities providing resource assistance and counseling for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Through the 1980s, I continued to photograph veteran parades, walks, and memorial services throughout the United States. In 1987, I attended the first welcome home parade for the Australian veterans in Sydney. I made my first return to Viet Nam in 1989 and in 1990, I lived for a year in South Korea. In order to document what happened to soldiers of four cultures after the war, I have had to live a nomadic life; accommodating to this chaotic schedule was necessary in order to tell their stories accurately.

For more than 30 many years I have been offering slide presentations for class-rooms and educational conferences about the war and culture of Viet Nam.

As an educator, I'm interested in how we tell the story to our children. I am interested in the methods and materials used in the different countries to teach about the war in Viet Nam—the American War, to some.

In November 2004, I made a conscious decision to choose a date to close my photographic project, “Wounds that Bind: Four Countries after the American War in Viet Nam.” Making photographs and living a nomadic life-style was creating personal stress and strain. I decided to make my last photograph



ABOVE LEFT: Me at Lai Khe, Viet Nam, 1968. ABOVE: The first welcome home parade for Australian veterans, 1987, Sydney, Australia. LEFT: Statues of Ho Chi Minh, Buddha, and Catholic in for repair, Xuan Loc, northeast of Ho Chi Minh City, 1997.

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of this project on April 30, 2005, in Saigon, Viet Nam.

Although April 30th was significant because of the fall of Saigon 30 years ago, that wasn't a major concern for my work. The date simply allowed me enough time to plan a return to Viet Nam in order to make my final photograph. However, like many plans, things can and do change.

In March 2005, en route to Viet Nam, I attended the 5th Triennial Vietnam Symposium held at Texas Tech University, in Lubbock. After I delivered my presentation, I was interested in a session about diaries, since I was interested in developing my own skills in writing. The session wasn't about writing skills. Rather, two brothers, Fred and Rob Whitehurst, both veterans of the war in Viet Nam, discussed two small diaries written in a delicate hand, which Fred had kept for 35 years.

In September 1970, Fred was burning captured documents that had no further value. Ready to toss two small hand-bound diaries in the blaze, Fred's Vietnamese interpreter said, "Don't throw these in the fire, Fred. They have fire in them already." The diaries belonged to a 27 year old female medical doctor from Ha Noi, killed near her jungle clinic in Duc Pho, about 45 kilometers south of Quang Ngai. Fred kept the two small diaries for 35 years, always wondering how to return them to her family. Now, Fred was offering the two small diaries to the Vietnam Center archivist.

After their session, I was moved to offer Fred some sort of consolation for his heart-felt gift: perhaps a photograph of a special location in Ha Noi. They gave me a CD on which both diaries had been scanned. Perhaps I could locate something connecting the past with the present.

A few days later, I arrived in Ha Noi, and went to the Quaker Office asking for help in understanding what was on the CD. My friend, Do Xuan Anh, put the CD in her computer and we briefly looked at some of the pages. I left the CD with Anh, and I went to Saigon to follow my plan to finish my project on April 30th.

Early on April 26th, while in Saigon, I woke to a phone call. Kim Tram introduced herself as Thuy's youngest sister—the youngest sister of the woman whose diary I had given Anh. Thuy's Mother and three sisters wanted to meet me in Ha Noi. I agreed to return to Ha Noi the next day.

The CD was waiting at my hotel, and sisters Kim Tram and Hien Tram took me to Mother Tram's home, which was ironically a few blocks from Anh's office. After being introduced to the many family members and the press, I opened my laptop computer and started the CD. Thuy's Mother and three sisters, Phuong, Hien, and Kim proceeded to view the electronic version of her diaries on my computer. After some tears and comments between the women about what they read, I gave them the CD and took my leave.

On April 30th Hien Tram, her husband Ho Nam, and their two sons, Ho Anh and Viet Anh, took me to Thuy's gravesite on the outskirts of Ha Noi. We did a ceremony for Thuy and several of the surrounding graves; the souls of these soldiers protect Thuy's spirit. My last photograph on April 30, 2005 was Thuy's 66-year-old caretaker of the cemetery.

On May 1st, I woke a new person. My 37-year photographic project was complete. I could now return to the



ABOVE RIGHT: Thuy's family: nephew, Ho Anh, on left, sisters Hien and Kim, and Mother Tram reading Thuy's diaries on my laptop, April 2005. ABOVE: Hien Tram, her two sons and husband doing ceremony at Thuy's grave, Ha Noi, April 30, 2005 RIGHT: The last photograph of my 37-year photo project was of Nguyen Huu Dao, cemetery caretaker where Thuy Tram is buried, Ha Noi, 30 April 2005. Opposite Page—ABOVE RIGHT: Archivist, Sarah Holmes, shows Mother Tram and the family the "house" she built for Thuy's diaries. Vietnam Center Archives, Texas Tech University, October 2006. CENTER LEFT: Vietnamese newspaper story of discovery of Thuy's diaries, the books, the Random House teacher's guide, and Mr. Dao, cemetery caretaker.

US and create a book of my photographs and stories.

In July 2005, the Tram family published, *Nhat Ky Dang Thuy Tram*, “*The Diaries of Dang Thuy Tram*.” Since then, more than 450,000 copies of the diaries have been sold in Viet Nam: a country where a run of 6,000 is a bestseller.

In August 2005, Fred and Rob Whitehurst received a hero’s welcome when they arrived in Ha Noi. The family took them to Thuy’s grave and Duc Pho, the village near where Thuy was killed and which now houses a new medical clinic in Thuy’s name.

In October 2005, Mother Tram, Phuong, Hien, and Kim made a visit to the Vietnam Center Archives in Lubbock, Texas. For the first time, they held Thuy’s diaries. The diaries remain in a special “house” made for them in the Archives.



September 11, 2007, Random House published *Last Night I Dreamed of Peace, The Diary of Dang Thuy Tram*, the English version, along with a teacher’s guide.

A good friend of Rob Whitehurst, Neil Alexander, is making a documentary film of the experience (www.findingthuy.com), and a Vietnamese feature film is also being produced.

As you read Thuy’s words, her thoughts, feelings, frustrations, fears, hopes, concerns and dreams of home and family, I believe she appears as an intelligent woman, intent on bringing her country together and forcing out foreign invaders. She has critical words for those above her, yet feels she relates to a culture larger than herself. Ironically, she was kept out of the communist party for a long time due to her educational background.

tional background.

What can truthfully be said and printed in a time of war, or after, has always been competing with censorship and propaganda. Anne Frank’s diary has faced challenges in the past as “sexually offensive,” a “real downer,” and pornographic. A few years ago, a branch of the Vietnamese government wouldn’t allow a Ha Noi bookstore to order Barbara Kingsolver’s, *The Cottonwood Bible*. The government officials thought the title was too religious.

As a result of the war in Viet Nam, and the national trauma of 9-11, it seems the psyche of our nation suffers a form of Post Traumatic Stress Denial. From the words and observations of others come the insights that make us remember and feel. Maybe America’s pre-emptive war and occupation of Iraq has prompted someone to keep a diary that will some day explain what happened in their life. ■

About the Writer

TED ENGELMANN is a member of the 2008 Distinguished Lecturer Program established by the Organization of American Historians (www.oah.org). Ted is available for presentations and his contact information is at www.tedengelmann.com.



LAST NIGHT I DREAMED OF PEACE: The Diary of Dang Thuy Tram

by Dang Thuy Tram Translated by Andrew X. Pham
Three Rivers Press, TR, 978-0-307-34738-1, 256pp., \$12.95

Written from 1968-1970, this diary of a young, idealistic Vietnamese doctor describes the horrors of war and her devotion to family, country, and the Communist party. Her last entry was made the day before she died protecting her hospital.

Fred Whitehurst, an American intelligence soldier in charge of burning all personal documents, was given the diary by a translator who told him not to burn it: “It has fire in it already.” Against regulations, he preserved the diary and kept it for thirty-five years. At times raw, at times lyrical and youthfully sentimental, Tram’s voice speaks across cultures of her humanity, dignity, and compassion.

Teacher’s Guide Available. To request email: rhacademic@randomhouse.com

Now in Paperback

“Last night, I dreamed that Peace was established . . .”

— Dang Thuy Tram, Vietnam,
June 4, 1968

