



Episode 6, 2012: Vietnamese Diary

Marge: My brother Gary was killed in Vietnam in March 1966. My brother Gary was killed in Vietnam in March 1966. After his death I met one of his Marine buddies, Bob Frazure. After a fierce fire-fight Bob went over to a dead Vietnamese soldier and found a Diary. With mixed emotions, He reached down and picked it up. And 46 years he felt he took something that really did not belong to him.

When I opened the Diary a picture of these two children fell out. I picked it up and looked at their faces. I had the feeling that I was holding something very sacred. Tears come to my eyes and my first thought was.....is this his children? Could it be his sister? Could the entries in the Diary be something for them?

What if this was my brother's diary? If they tried to find me, I would feel like a piece of him came home. This is something he would want me to do...Find who that family was and return it to them.

Wes: I'm in Springfield, Missouri and I'm on my way to see uh Marge and Bob.

This story has special meaning to me because I grew up during the Vietnam War, and you know I didn't serve but I sure remember my draft number. I understand Bob is not in good shape. He's breathing oxygen all the time and I guess I'm lucky that he's still around to tell me his story.

Wes: I can't tell you how great it is to be here with you. How do you know each other.

Marge: I uh, I wanted to do a story about my brother, a tribute and in my research I found Bob.

Wes: What do you remember about the day you found the diary?

Bob: I got the diary towards the end of March of uh 1966, Operation Indiana.

Wes: While in pursuit of the enemy, Charlie Company in the 1st battalion, 7th marines had been ambushed in a rural area in a hot zone known as I corps. 11 marines died, and around 55 were wounded. Bob Frazure's bravo company arrived the next morning and witnessed the aftermath.

Bob: I was the very first person there. That diary was out of his shirt, it was laying in plain sight. I just wanted something to bring back, it was a spur of the moment deal.

Wes: Bob says he found the diary's owner inside a pit, where it appears he'd been part of a team firing a heavy machine gun.

Bob: There were two or three drag trails where they had drug other soldiers away from there. And the only reason they didn't drag him away from there was because It just got too hot for them.

Wes: But you think that he, that he died laying down covering fire.

Bob: Oh I know he did. I absolutely know he did. Yeah he was, he had killed a lot of our boys. He was shooting right through a rice paddy dyke and he just mowed them down. He was left behind as the Rear-end guard. So when they left him there, he wasn't gonna leave there; he was going to die right there on that hillside.

And I could never quite figure out why that diary was out of his shirt.

Wes: Do you think that maybe he was trying to give it to one of the retreating soldiers or--

Bob: Like I said, I have never figured that out.

Wes: You had this for forty six years now, almost a half a century, did you feel guilty having it?

Bob: I wanted to get rid of it. It wasn't something I wanted to keep.

Marge: My first thought was that it was comments that he made to his family so his family would know what happened to him if indeed he was killed in war.

Bob: For me it will mean the world.

Wes: The back of the diary has the embossed words, doan thanh nien... but the writing inside is tiny, hard to read, and some of the ink has bled thru.

Wes: Wait a minute....

Inside there's a piece of thin paper with formatted print and faded writing. There's that same word again, doan. It could be an I.D. card... and then, there's this photograph.

Whether they're sisters, or this soldier's children we don't know. There is a long inscription on the back of the photograph. And then a couple pieces of Vietnamese Currency. This is a very poignant reminder of the losses that both sides suffered during the Vietnam War, with entries that end of course, presumably when the soldier himself was killed.

What I would like to do the first thing is to send it to the Conservation Lab at the Morgan Library in New York City.

The lab will make ultraviolet scans which will hopefully make the diary easier to translate. While I'm waiting, I want to get more information about who the marines were fighting during operation Indiana. I'm attending a reunion of bravo company, 1st battalion, 7th marines in Missouri, which includes retired lieutenant colonel Robert Prewett and private first class Dave Shelton.

They *also* saw the grisly aftermath of operation Indiana the morning Bob Frazure picked up the diary.

And just three weeks earlier, in operation Utah, they'd landed helicopters in the same area of the Quang Ngai province, and found themselves in a hornets nest of enemy fire.

Bob: You could hear the whistles of the unit leaders—shouting, hollering. I don't know – Just hell broke loose.

Dave: And that's when I, the very first time I ever saw a guy face to face just before I fired. The machine gun squad leader twenty feet to my left was killed by a gunshot to the abdomen, one of the other members of my squad bent down to pick up his helmet and he was killed by a head shot, he fell on top of me.

Bob: These guys were good, and they could fight. They were determined to wipe us out.

Wes: The veterans believe the soldiers they fought in this battle, and in operation Indiana were from the same unit of the north Vietnamese army.

Up until then, the marines had been fighting local Vietcong Guerrillas.

Dave: It was in the same area, and it was the same people. We thought we had pretty much eradicated them the first time around, but they came back. That's the Indiana hill right there. Where the A4 has just dropped a Napalm Bomb.

Wes: When you got up on this hilltop, you knew that it had been a terrible fight there?

Dave: Absolutely. There were in excess of 20 dead NVA still in their spider-holes

Wes: And it was at this moment, that Bob Frazure picked up the diary.

And were there uniform patches? The NVA had uniform patches, or...?

Dave: I didn't see any. Did you, Colonel?

Bob: No, no

Wes: And how could you tell them from the Viet Cong?

Dave: Because they were uniformed.

Bob: Greenish grey uniforms.

Dave: And the VC just wore black silk pants, pajamas. Sometimes a cone hat. In this guy's case, he but probably had very little contact with the family back home, and then he just never came back. There was no closure. They don't know where he went, how he got there, or where he was killed. This will give his family closure.

Wes: I'm in Washington D.C., I'm here to see Marc Leepson, he's a Vietnam vet and an author about Vietnam. It never ceases to affect me, 58,000 names are here.

Marc: It's not a memorial that celebrates this war, which was so controversial; it honors Vietnam Veterans who survived and Vietnam Veterans who died.

Wes: With Marc's help, we find Marge's brother Gary's name on the wall. You know, while we're standing in front of our memorial, how many North Vietnamese were killed?

Marc: You know, we don't have the exact figure but it could be one and a half or two million.

Wes: One study on Vietnamese casualties puts the number as high as 3.8 million. You know, the folks that own this diary, they really want to find out if we can return it to the family

of the soldier. The seventh marines were in the northern part of South Vietnam. What was this territory like and what was going on in March of '66?

Marc: I'll show you on the map. This is Quang Ngai where we're talking about here.

Wes: So what was the strategic importance of this area?

Marc: The strategic importance there is that was crawling with North Vietnamese and Vietcong as well. Regiments of them.

Wes: Marc explains, that by 1966 large numbers of North Vietnamese army regulars were pouring south through neighboring Laos and Cambodia down the Ho Chi Minh trail----a maze of primitive roads, jungle paths and waterways extending over 1500 miles of terrain.

Marc: We tried to destroy the trail. They kept moving it. The main strategic mission of Americans in Vietnam was what we call the war of attrition or search and destroy.

Wes: So where did this guy come from?

Marc: That's a good question. If I had to guess, I would say he was a North Vietnamese soldier. I think you're going to find out when you get this diary translated.

Wes: Merle Pribbenow was a Vietnamese language specialist for the CIA during the war. He's been studying the ultra-violet scans made by the Thaw Conservation Center at the Morgan library and museum which have enhanced the faded script.

Merle: Diaries are often very difficult things to uh translate, especially the case during the war. The people from the North developed their own vocabulary, they said things differently.

(Speaking Vietnamese) - That means literally: "Identity certificate", and there's his date of birth, you know it's faded as to the day and month, but you can clearly see he was born in 1937.

Wes: That means if he was killed in '66 he was 29 years old...

Merle: 28 or 29, that's correct. So here is his name: Vu Dinh Doan.

Wes: Wait a minute---Doan.

Doan was one of the words embossed on the diary cover.

Merle: It can be a name, but Doan also – it means "group",

Wes: Oh okay.

Merle: This says, "Doan thang mien, ma don Vietnam."

Wes: And the translation of that is?

Merle: That's Communist Party Youth Group. This was actually a group for young people to prepare them for party membership.

Wes: Did they hand these diaries out to every soldier?

Merle: I do not believe so, no, this guy probably would have been somebody that they were considering for moving up. North Vietnamese soldiers technically they weren't actually supposed to keep diaries.

Wes: Ha, ha ok...

Merle: And here he is talking about where he is from. This is his home, Kay Hamlet, Long Suyen Village, Benzan District, Haizun province, North Vietnam.

Wes: The province is certainly still there.

Merle: You can find it yes.

Wes: Hai Duong province is 35 miles from the capitol of Hanoi and almost five hundred miles from the former border with South Vietnam. The diary records how, on August 11th 1965, Doan began his journey.

Merle: (Reading Vietnamese) Here, he's going into Laos. This is---in Vietnamese it's "Chun San" that is the end of Annamite Mountains.

Wes: It confirms what Marc and the vets had suspected.

So wait a minute, when he crosses into Laos, he must of been coming down the Ho Chi Minh Trail then.

MERLE: Yes.

Wes: The trail was grueling for Vietnamese soldiers - mountains, jungle, and relentless air attack.

Merle: "On this march I have encountered a great deal of problems". "I ate cold rice gruel, made of leaves" "There were great difficulties with food on the trails."

Wes: On October 13th, the climbing became even harder.

Merle: "On the death anniversary of my father, I had to climb a – um – pass that was 2800 meters high."

Wes: Oh my gosh.

Merle: That's pretty high.

Wes: 7500 feet.

Merle: And he says, actually, that sweat was pouring off of him. And it took eight hours to reach the top, and when he reached the top... "He len deg nuee – I was able to see South Vietnam."

Wes: After weeks of hauling heavy weapons over mountain peaks, Doan could see where he had come to fight. He thought of his father, and his father's death.

Merle: In Vietnam, especially in traditional Vietnam, the date of the death anniversary was very important, because you, uh you have your death alters. The Vietnamese came from the Confucian tradition of ancestor worship. And every house has a death altar.

Wes: It's incredibly poignant to hear these words written from a soldier on the other side.

This diary, obviously, would be very valuable to the family.

Merle : It would show the family that he was thinking about them,

Wes: You know, Merle, as you're translating this, I got to tell you, this is one of the most exciting things that I've done in ten years on History Detectives. I still don't know what regiment the guy was with. Is there any way for us to determine that?

Merle: All indications are that he was 21st Regiment.

Wes: Although the diary does not give a regiment number, merle says the dates match the history of the 21st regiment – one of the earliest NVA units to arrive in South Vietnam.

Merle: It was organized in North Vietnam in uh the summer of '65, and marched down in the uh fall of '65 it was formed in the in the province where he's from. In Hai Duong Province.

Wes: By the fourth of March 1966 – seven months after leaving home, Doan's regiment was northwest of Quang Nai city, engaged in fierce fighting with U.S. forces.

Merle: Twelve helicopters arrived and landed troops, then my unit fought all day. And that's the last entry in this diary, 21 March, of 1966.

Wes: Thats it?!

Merle: That's it that's where it ends,

Wes: He was killed, one week later in Operation Indiana.

Merle: Yeah...yeah

Wes: Wow. I want you to look at this photo too, the inscription on the back, what's it say?

Merle: Ok, this says, dear Niet and Ian...

Wes: So that's who these girls are?

Merle: Probably. (Translating diary...) "If I am alive when the country is unified, we will all be together again, we will truly be happy when our country is unified."

He refers to them as "Em" which means younger sister, but it's not necessarily a relative, it also applies for people that are younger than you, that are in a close relationship with you.

Wes: They're probably not his daughters, but we really don't know how they were related?

Merle: Right, in Vietnamese that's not enough to tell you

Wes: Do I have enough now to find his family?

Merle: You have enough to start the search.

Wes: I was able to enlist the help of Kyle Horst, a former U.N. staff member who lived in Vietnam for 10 years. We're meeting at the Van Hanh Buddhist temple, just outside Washington DC. Kyle and his contacts in Vietnam have searched for weeks for anyone related to the diary owner.

Were you able to find the family or village of Vu Dinh Doan?

Kyle: You would think in a country of 90 million people which is still largely rural that that would be impossible but in fact the Vietnamese are deeply rooted in their communities.

Kyle's Vietnam contacts were able to track down surviving members of Doan's NVA regiment, who remembered him.

Kyle: This is a picture of him. A painting of a photograph.

Wes: Wow.

It's amazing that the search effort was able to retrieve an actual image of Doan. The veterans informed Kyle that of the fifty young men that had enlisted with Doan from his small farming village, only three survived the war.

Kyle: Within that regiment he was part of a reserve artillery squad. The name of the Unit, "Hao Doi" would suggest a reserve or "Rear Guard" function for that unit.

Wes: As a rear guard, Doan's job may have been to sacrifice his life, so others could escape. Which is exactly what Bob Frazure had suspected.

The picture of the girls was particularly haunting for Marge and Bob.

Kyle's team had actually found Doan's village, and also discovered his memorial tomb. He sent a researcher to investigate further.

Kyle: It took some questioning of various people in the village to confirm exactly who these two were. Take a look at this, so here's the same photo being held, by the younger girl who's now 71 year old woman--- the woman holding the picture.

Wes: Oh my god.

Kyle: You can see the resemblance.

This older gal her name is Ian. She moved away to another province, a few hours away, she's also still alive.

Wes: Are these his sisters?

Kyle: Actually these are not his sisters but in fact they were members of the "Xuixa" which is the village gorilla squad, village militia.

Wes: Are you kidding me?

Kyle: In fact through North Vietnamese History going back thousands of years. The great generals, the great military heroes, the one who led the charge, they were mostly women.

The militia did participate in the war effort, and sometimes, even fired anti-aircraft guns at U.S. forces.

Kyle: The older one. I think, I mean she was a member of the cultural troupe which had patriotic songs or skits involving music or poetry to give to these soldiers to take with them like this photo.

Wes: After the war, the Vietnamese government assigned Doan martyr status – an official recognition given to soldiers who died while serving their country.

Kyle: His family still lives in the very same hamlet that he was born and raised in before he went off to the war. This in fact is a picture of the two surviving children of martyr Doan, holding that photo that I showed you a little earlier. Three sons one daughter, so he's the only one of the three sons still alive, his name is "Son". Here is a photo of Doan's wife, her name is "Fung".

Wes: Oh my god. So Kyle, how do I get the diary back to the family?

Should we take a deep breath?

Bob: We're trying.

Wes: There's a picture of him.

Marge: Oh my goodness!

Bob: WOW!

Wes: He was the head of the local militia in his village and uh when he joined the North Vietnamese army he became a squad leader of that 51 caliber machine gun that you guys found. There he is with his wife.

Bob: Good lookin young kid really.

Wes: And here he is with his wife and two of his children. He had three sons and one daughter.

Marge: I'm sorry.

Wes: No, no, that's okay. It's all right.

Marge: They were real people just like us.

Wes: The two young ladies are not the soldier's children. These two were members of the local village militia.

Our photographer had found Pham Ti Nhat still living in the village, and she remembered Doan and her long-ago photograph.

Translator: We presented this photo to him before he went into the army. In the militia, we did a lot of things. We served in an anti-aircraft troop, which shot down an US aircraft that's why I was awarded a medal.

Bob: Well I'll be darned.

Marge: Wes, were you able to find his family??

Wes: Members of his family are still living, and that is his only surviving son and his daughter.

Sadly, Doan's widow Phuong had passed away, only weeks after hearing about the discovery of her husband's diary. Our photographer had found the surviving daughter and son mourning their mother's death.

Bob: Oh, no, oh my God.

Wes: This is an excerpt from an interview with his son in Vietnam.

Translator: Hello, I am Vu Dinh Son, a son of martyr Vu Dinh Doan, you pick up my father's diary. On behalf of my family, I would like to say thank you. During the war, I think you were an ethical person.

Bob: Isn't that something?

Wes: The person who's the happiest to learn of the diary was Vu Dinh Doan's wife.

Bob: [Reading] Before she died, my mother was very happy she received the news about my father's diary. This is what she told me.... I can't read that...

Marge: [Reading] "This is what she told me, about the American who wanted to return the diary. In war, if you don't shoot me I will shoot you. The fact that this man held on to my father's papers and sought to return them, proves that the one who survived is a good man, a moral man." You were to keep that diary for this.

Bob: I would like to know what happened to that diary if it was returned to him?

Wes: That's a great question, and actually we found something very special to do with this diary.

History Detectives is about to be involved in international diplomacy. Right now I'm on my way to meet with the representative from the United States Department of Defense and I'm gonna turn this diary over to secretary of defense Leon Panetta who is going to take it to Vietnam.

Panetta: My whole trip here is trying to improve relations between our two countries 50 years after we were at war. If this can help that healing process I think we will serve an important purpose in trying to let them know that we care about not only our people that were lost in battle, but their people as well.

Wes: On June 4th, 2012, secretary Panetta handed the diary to Vietnam's defense minister Phung Quang Thanh; part of an exchange of artifacts which included returned letters from a U.S. serviceman.

Panetta: A diary that was recovered in war that can hopefully be given back to that individual's family.

Marge: It's amazing.

Bob: Unbelievable.

Wes: The Diary will really go down in the history of our continued healing process.

Wes: Does this bring you any closure?

Bob: It's so far out of my imagination that you could find all of this out. So to me we both got closure. I'm just so happy that we got it where it belongs, I'm really grateful for that. I couldn't have asked for anything more than that.

Wes: The Vietnamese government is planning a ceremony to present the diary back to the family, with the ultimate goal of displaying it in a museum. For updates on this story, visit pbs.org/historydetectives.