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**Vietnam's church flourishes
nearly four decades after a
notorious missionary martyrdom.**



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BAN ME THUOT

Despite years of persecution, followers of Jesus flourish in Vietnam's central highlands.

BY ELLEN VAUGHN

Bob and Marie Ziemer and their fellow missionaries were noncombatants. The tribespeople told the Viet Cong how these Americans had painstakingly learned their language, how they ran a leprosarium, clinic, church, and school and welcomed all in the name of Jesus. Still, the missionaries walked lightly. Five years earlier three colleagues had been taken captive by the communists and disappeared. Another had been shot in a highway blockade.

So as the Vietnam War escalated, the missionaries made evacuation

plans. If the fighting became too intense they had an escape strategy in place. For Bob Ziemer, this go-or-stay tension was difficult. What did it mean to really trust God—yet to also take reasonable defense measures? He and his partners were ready to die for the Gospel, if need be. On the other hand, God had stopped the mouths of lions and He could protect them from any danger.

In 1947, Bob, a no-nonsense German from Ohio, had sailed for French Indochina with his wife and settled in Ban Me Thuot north of

Saigon, deep in the central highlands. The area was home to spirit-worshipping tribes, the largest of which was the Raday clan. As the Ziemers and their fellow missionaries learned the language and spent time among the people, many found Christ and freedom from the spirit world.

One day Bob traveled to a remote village to visit a small church. He had just arrived when the pastor took him aside and insisted that he leave. Although everything seemed quiet, Bob headed back to the mission compound. The roads were rough and one bridge in particular was slow going. Had the pastor overreacted?

A week later Bob talked to a government official. “You were lucky the other day,” the man told him.

“Why?” asked Bob.

“You know that bridge you crossed? The Viet Cong had rigged it with explosives. The next car that went over it was blown to pieces.”

Bob knew it wasn't luck that had saved him. His times were in God's hands. He just didn't know when that time would be done. So he deliberately set about to make sure that the work in Ban Me Thuot was firmly in the hands of the local Christians.

First, Bob finished translating the Bible into the local Raday dialect. He worked late into the nights by the light of an old gas lantern and by the end of January, 1968 he had sent his translation off for printing. The church and school were now under the leadership

of a trained Raday pastor and the leprosarium was run by local Christian professionals. Bob's objective was, by God's grace, accomplished.

A ceasefire was in place between the People's Army of North Vietnam and the South Vietnamese and American troops. Thousands of soldiers were on leave. Civilians took to the streets,

“You know that bridge you crossed? The Viet Cong had rigged it with explosives. The next car that went over it was blown to pieces.”

shooting off fireworks to celebrate Tet, their sacred New Year.

In the midst of the festivities, however, disguised Viet Cong soldiers made their way into the south. Thousands of undercover troops were armed and in place when the communists' Tet Offensive exploded with an unbridled ferocity that made it one of the most horrific campaigns in modern military history.

At the mission compound in Ban Me Thuot, missionaries Bob and Marie Ziemer, Ed and Ruth Thompson, Leon Griswold and his daughter Carolyn, and nurses Ruth Wilting and Betty Olsen were in their homes. A U.S. helicopter base was four miles away, a South Vietnamese army base just behind the compound. And Highway 14—a key Viet Cong target—split right through the middle of the mission property.



Robert Ziemer

On Monday night of the Tet week, the missionaries fell asleep to the pop-pop of firecrackers. Early on Tuesday they woke to the pops of small-arms fire and artillery. Communist soldiers rapped on the door of the small home Carolyn and her father shared and a few minutes later there was an enormous explosion.

The Ziemers could hear moans coming from the wreckage. But now the battle outside was at full tilt: communist attackers were coming up from the valley below them with tanks and artillery. South Vietnamese soldiers were moving across the compound

The Ziemers could hear moans coming from the wreckage.

as their own tanks rolled along the highway. To go outside would mean getting caught in a deadly crossfire. When light dawned, the men ran to

the Griswold home, desperately pulling wood and plaster aside to get to Carolyn who had a badly broken leg and internal injuries. By the time they got to Leon, he was dead.

The battle raged all day. The nurses ran through gunfire to get blood from the clinic and set up Carolyn and some wounded believers in the servants' quarters. Bob and Ed put up a white flag for the communists to see and dug out the garbage pit behind the Thompson's house to serve as a makeshift bunker. They painted an SOS on an old door to signal American pilots, unaware that the U.S. base was pinned down by artillery fire. Meanwhile communist troops continued their assault on the South Vietnamese tanks and infantry just down the highway.

Wednesday evening the missionaries huddled in the Ziemer home watched as the Thompson house was blown apart. The group moved to the servants' quarters and then to the garbage pit as the shooting intensified. Raday Christians jumped in with them. At dawn Ruth and Betty ran to the clinic for more medical supplies. As Betty tried to get a car to drive Carolyn to a hospital, she was surrounded and dragged away.

The Ziemers' house exploded as Viet Cong soldiers filled the clearing and Bob knew he had to get his injured friends out of there. He scrambled from the bunker, hands in the air, shouting to the soldiers in their own language. They responded with a barrage of gunfire.

Ruth ran toward the bunker as the soldiers shot her repeatedly. She fell in on top of the Thompsons and Marie

Ziemer. The Viet Cong advanced. As Ed Thompson raised his hands in a gesture of surrender, crying "Mercy!" a blast of machine gun fire and grenades ripped through the pit.

On the campus of Wheaton College, the Ziemers' son Tim answered a knock on his door to find the chaplain standing there. Hearing that his father had been killed in the attack on Ban Me Thuot and his mother taken prisoner, Tim went out alone to walk in the snow. He thought about the incident on the explosive-rigged bridge: his dad had felt so clearly that God had protected him, that it wasn't yet his time. Bob had worked hard to make the ministries at Ban Me Thuot self-sufficient so they would run well for Christ even if he was gone. And now he was.

A call later confirmed that Tim's father and colleagues were dead along with the Christians who had taken shelter with them. His

mother was badly wounded, but alive. When the Viet Cong pulled Marie from the garbage pit, both eardrums were punctured from the explosion and she was groggy and slippery with blood. Just yards away, she saw her husband. The AK-47 rounds had hit his upper body and he lay suspended across the cord of the compound clothesline, still breathing.

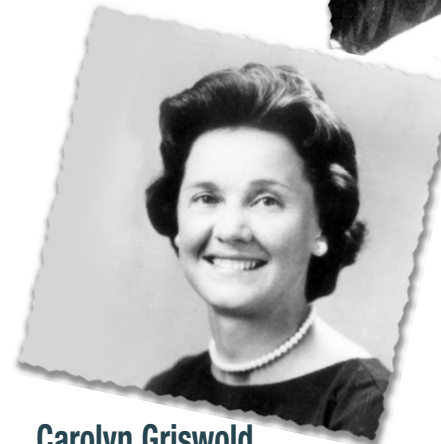
Marie begged the soldiers to let her go to him but they would not. Waving their guns, they propelled her forward. Weak from loss of blood, she kept her eyes on Bob as long as she could. The next day the Viet Cong decided Marie was of no use; she was just going to die. They dumped her by the side of the road where she lay for hours until a young Raday believer found her

and took her to a local hospital.

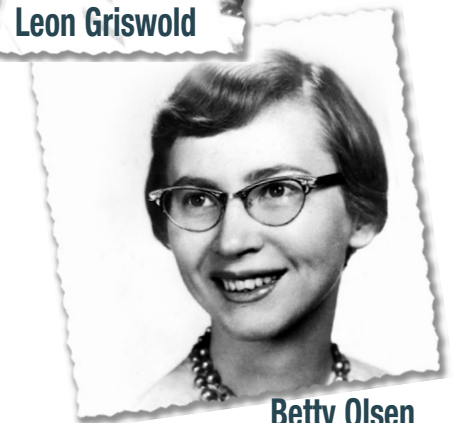
Bob Ziemer loved life, but he was ready for death. And when it came he was too busy caring for others to



Leon Griswold



Carolyn Griswold



Betty Olsen

ponder the fact that his day was drawing to a close. Suddenly, it was time. As Bob hung over that clothesline, his blood pouring out on the earth, he saw for a moment the swirling green of the jungle canopy, heard the staccato of gunfire, the shouts of the soldiers, his wife's sweet voice.

The swirling slowed. Then, suddenly, clear as the Light all around him, in the brilliance of a thousand suns, he heard the joyous welcome: *"Well done, my good and faithful servant!"*

When I was a young girl, the story of the missionaries who died in Ban Me Thuot grabbed my heart. I remember my mother crying about their sacrifice. How they chose to live in time and the legacy they left for eternity have stirred my soul ever since.

When I traveled to Vietnam a few years ago, I was humbled by the believers there. I told my mother how their faith in Jesus had brought them through times of terrible persecution. She smiled, with tears in her eyes. So after Mom's death it seemed right to use part of the money she left behind to build several small churches in Vietnam in her memory. We didn't specify any particular location.

When I received word in the mail about the first church, there was a map and photos of the congregation,

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slender, dark-haired, radiant with the love of Jesus. Then I looked at the map. In the central highlands, a red circle marked the town where Mom's church would be built. It was a name I'd known since I was 11 years old. *Ban Me Thuot.*

At about the same time, I met a man named Tim at my church and discovered it was his father who died in that mission compound. Today Rear Admiral Timothy Ziemer is a decorated Vietnam veteran and naval officer. He was also CEO of World Relief and now heads a major malaria initiative, managing a \$1.5 billion program designed to cut malaria deaths in 15 needy nations.

"Christ modeled how to live in time," Tim told me. "He went to the poor and suffering." Tim has tried to do the same. He's a strategic thinker like his father. He's also propelled by his mother's legacy. "I've been with

spiritual leaders all over the world," he says, "but it's the example of my mother—an ordinary farm girl—that has showed me most powerfully what it means to know the Saviour and trust Him completely."

Today, Tim still has no answers to the core questions. Why did God allow the deaths of his father and the other missionaries, the terrible persecution of so many Vietnamese believers? But one thing *is* clear. While America's military mission in Vietnam was unresolved, his parents' spiritual mission wasn't deterred. Today, in Vietnam—an officially communist nation—the church has grown exponentially, watered by the blood of its many martyrs. In those central highlands near Ban Me Thuot where there were once only spirit-worshippers, there are at least 400,000 followers of Jesus. Many are the spiritual grandchildren of those who gave their lives and made a difference for time and eternity.

If the King is taking care of our business, then we are free to invest ourselves fully in His business and can fling ourselves with abandon into God's work. Even when we come to our end, He



Soldiers pausing at the graves of the martyred missionaries in Vietnam.

will not let us go. Like God's servants throughout the centuries, we have the freedom to be extravagant with our very lives. 🍃

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DAILY BIBLE READINGS

- Sunday, September 5** • Read: 1 Cor. 14:21-40
- Monday, September 6** • Read: 1 Cor. 15:1-32
- Tuesday, September 7** • Read: 1 Cor. 15:33-58
- Wednesday, September 8** • Read: 1 Cor. 16
- Thursday, September 9** • Read: 2 Cor. 1
- Friday, September 10** • Read: 2 Cor. 2
- Saturday, September 11** • Read: 2 Cor. 3

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