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Photography, History and Memory
May 5, 2011

Photography, Man and the Divine Eye: Sister Ann and the Suffering of Khmer Rouge Survivors

"I hate war but I cannot hate the warriors." – Sister Ann Catherine

*Note: When I came across Sister Ann's photographs, I was taken aback by the moments, the people, the smiles and the laughter captured during a time and at a place that has always haunted me. I contacted her to talk to her further about her pictures and her experiences. Sister Ann told me she kept the pictures hidden for 30 years and only recently took them out of their box. And when she took out that box of photographs, the memories and the pain associated with those memories simply flooded back. She was traumatized; she had tried to forget but she never could. Her trauma that was revived acutely speaks to the power of photographs. Photographs can do something, can convey something, that writing simply is incapable of doing. To see is to imagine, to know that "what was" *was* really real. So when Sister Ann asked me what I thought about her releasing these photographs to the public, about whether or not these photographs would do anything for anyone, I enthusiastically told her yes, yes they would. Photographs can transport suffering; photographs can create awareness; photographs can defy ignorance; photographs remember, they do not forget. They do the greatest justice for the victims photographed. This essay is an attempt to explain the importance of Sister Ann's archive, the importance of bringing the private into the public. To see and to remember: this is the only way to bring justice to the victims' suffering.

Sister Ann, I am forever thankful to you for sharing these photographs with us, for bringing us back to your 1980. We may not be able to stop war but I believe that by bringing awareness of suffering to others, we can pave the way to peace.

I.

In photographs of war, of sadness, of pain, there is a near impossibility in understanding the extent of suffering captured in the moment, a moment that continues to live on and that continues to agonize. As Susan Sontag points out in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, “we – ‘...the privileged and the merely safe’ – don’t understand. We don’t get it. We truly can’t imagine what it was like.”¹ There is a continuous separation between “us” and “them.” And as John Berger points out, as “most photographs taken of people are about suffering,” we must realize that “most of that suffering is man-made.”² In light of this, man could never assume that he can judge what is being depicted in the photographs. He is not entitled to do so. Instead, the camera records photographs to remind spectators of the suffering man inflicts on others and to remind him that there is a divine eye that sees this and more. Berger describes this divine eye as “inseparably linked with the principle of justice.”³ The camera acts as a mechanism to show us that it is “possible to escape the justice of men, but not this higher justice from which nothing or little could be hidden.”⁴ The higher authority is the only one who can judge these photographs; the divine eye understands the meaning behind this suffering more than we, spectators, ever could.

This use of photography is the backbone to Sister Ann’s archive of photographs and diary, which describe (or attempt to describe) her time in Nong Samet refugee camp with Khmer Rouge regime survivors in 1980. Taken by an anonymous Japanese photographer, the images are in black and white. They capture smiling children with bloated stomachs; men and women sitting under their tents; young male soldiers walking away from the camera. And they capture Sister Ann, in her glowing white robe,

¹ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, New York: Picador, 2003: 7, 125.

² John Berger, “Uses of Photography,” 1978: 57.

³ Ibid 54.

⁴ Ibid.

standing in stark contrast to the Khmer survivors, blending into the lit background. Sister Ann is both the human and the divine in these photographs; she is God's eye of judgment.⁵

Sister Ann's set of photographs is also accompanied by her diary. By entrusting us, spectators, with her diary, Sister Ann's private memories become public memory. Likewise, the photographs shift from the private arena into the public discourse. We are able to access her inner most thoughts and we see her in the unique position as the one who experiences and realizes truth. Like the photographs, Sister Ann's diary addresses the divine eye (and at times pleads to the divine eye). Furthermore, like the photographs, the diary relays to us that we, man, are responsible for all of this suffering. The diary and the photographs record the tragedy of the survivors in all of its horror. They express exasperation at mankind; in this exasperation, we are reminded that we continue to be judged for what we do to each other, for what we allow to happen, and for all of the suffering we create. It is an ethical responsibility that we *all* share. In other words: for shame of the world's inaction, we, as privileged members of humanity, share a responsibility for these deaths. Our very membership in this same global community requires that we *all* adopt this guilt.

Man's creation and refusal to prevent or to intervene against suffering implicates us all in this injustice. In the case of the Khmer Rouge survivors, it was man's idea to create and to organize a utopian agrarian society ruled by paranoia, fear, and death. It was man who deprived his fellow man of food, who forced his fellow man to work until the point of exhaustion, who killed his fellow man when his work was not good enough. And we, the international community -- those who were not in Cambodia during the Khmer Rouge period -- simply turned a blind eye. We knew something bad was

⁵ In my conversation with Sister Ann, we discussed how she and the refugees felt a commonality that was deeply spiritual, that went beyond the names of "Buddhism" and "Roman Catholicism." They became one because of their deep spirituality. Thus, by God, I do not mean to refer to a particular religious sect's divine authority. Rather, I refer to a higher authority, a spirituality that sees all and judges all for all of mankind, a divine authority that transcends man's religion.

happening, that people were dying unjust deaths in Cambodia. Yet we did not bother to intervene. Worst, when the Khmer Rouge was defeated by Vietnam (and let us not forget that this intervention only happened because the Khmer Rouge kept terrorizing bordering Vietnamese communities), we failed to help Cambodia condemn the Khmer Rouge. Instead, we gave the Khmer Rouge a seat in the UN and watched as they continued to terrorize villages in Cambodia, leading millions of Cambodians to flee to Thailand for refuge. So, how could we ever judge the suffering in the photographs if we let everything that we see in these photographs happen?

II.

There is an image in Sister Ann's set that cries the sorrows of war above all the other photos. It is a sepia-toned photograph of a young girl alone in a field.⁶ She turns 90 degrees to look at someone, not the photographer, someone next to the photographer. Her face is in agony. She is half clothed. She is scratching her back. Above her are Thailand's bare, dry fields. Lifeless. Everything has been destroyed. The little girl stands there alone. She has survived the genocide. And now, the photograph asks, "What is left for her? Where is her family? Look at all that war has denied her and will continue to deny her. How we have abandoned her!"

Non-stop imagery shouts at us and we are forced to face its message with each glance. The photographs lay out the facts of war and of suffering. "This is what war does. And that, that is what it does too. War tears, rends. War rips open, eviscerates. War scorches. War dismembers. War *ruins*."⁷ They transport war's heart wrenching consequences to us. The corollaries of war -- the family wrecking, soul scorching, destructive capabilities of war -- are epitomized in Sister Ann's photographs.

⁶ See image 1.

⁷ Sontag 3.

Sister Ann describes the fundamental sadness in the girl's agonized expression most eloquently in her diary; she knows that the little girl's sadness rests in the fact that all of this suffering is man-made. The little girl endured the Khmer Rouge period, an era that killed off nearly 2 million Cambodians and that destroyed the lives of 8 million others for the sake of an idea. The divine had no say in it. "You have created a fantastic creation – man, sea, land, nature, etc. But we, man, in our struggle to be gods, have destroyed and hurt so much."⁸ This image performs a vital function. It shows us what we are capable of, what we may volunteer to do to one another enthusiastically and self-righteously. The very existence of the photograph forces us to face the consequences of our actions (or inactions).

Ultimately, all we can ask when we see the photograph of the little girl is, "What is left for those who endured and survived? What comes next?" We are at a loss for how to judge this photograph; we want to reach out, to help her, to steer her in the right direction and take her under our wing. These feelings are possible because we can see her suffering. Photography is capable of showing the realism of her suffering, of showing that "things *like* this happened."⁹ The little girl really *was* standing in the field, alone. The photographer was there to see it, "and unless there's been some tampering or misrepresenting, it is the truth."¹⁰

These photographs transport the spectator into the despair of the situation, which can be understood alongside Sister Ann's thoughts. "Lord, the horrors and meaninglessness of war. I have grown to love these people so much. I feel I am abandoning them when we have to leave. We can leave the war scene – they have to live in it constantly. What is the meaning – broken hearts and families, loneliness, tears, despair. The innocent are the ones who suffer."¹¹ As Sister Ann addresses the divine in her diary entries, we come to understand that these photographs are also meant for the

⁸ Sister Ann's Diary: 4/12/1980.

⁹ Sontag 47.

¹⁰ Ibid 46.

¹¹ Sister Ann's diary: 4/12/1980.

divine. The picture of the little girl in the field only tells the spectator that, since man has allowed the girl to suffer, he has proven that he cares not for justice, thus he has no right to provide judgment on the situation. Only this divine eye can see, can understand and can judge the girl's suffering.

III.

A vital function of memory is images – “to remember is, more and more, not to recall a story but to be able to call up a picture.”¹² Photographs can relay to us events of the past vividly in a non-judgmental way. This is because they are records of the real, they are “a trace, something directly stenciled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask.”¹³ They make us aware of “what was there.” As Sontag argues, photography's “basic unit is the single image.”¹⁴ This memory freeze has a deeper bite than nonstop imagery because it forces us to examine a single instant in time. As the camera “saves a set of appearances from the otherwise inevitable supersession of further appearances... [as] it holds them unchanging,” we are able to absorb all of the suffering that is captured.¹⁵ We are able to stand back and to examine the meaning of the photographs in a way that nonstop imagery would not allow us.

Sister Ann's diary provides the public with access to her memories. Each memory draws a picture of an instance; they are images of what she saw. When she speaks of how “the young people who are homeless and utterly on their own – they have sad faces, broken bodies – deep crying inside,” she allows the public to envision them sitting in the fields or on their camp beds, staring off into the distance, alone.¹⁶ When she writes: “the last person I saw as we left Kang I Dong was Rat. Just waved good bye as our car was racing away. Again, he is a symbol of the tragedy of the situation: no freedom,

¹² Sontag 89.

¹³ Berger 50.

¹⁴ Sontag 22.

¹⁵ Berger 51.

¹⁶ Sister Ann's diary: 6/26/1980.

broken family. Yet I will never forget the final cheering as I left Samet by the many kids – “ok” “bye-bye” – many smiles!” she is providing the public with this image of her departure.¹⁷ It is because her diary is accompanied by photographs that the public can imagine her waving goodbye to the children with their smiles. Sister Ann’s set has given the public images of the children she speaks of; she has given the public images of what life is like in the camps. This has created a narrative that centers on the successful integration of her memories into social memory.

Yet, although the photographs can convey the pain manifest in the camps, they also cause us to question what we do not see. As Sontag points out, “the pity and disgust [of] pictures... should not distract you from asking what pictures, whose cruelties, whose deaths are *not* being shown.”¹⁸ What is behind the smiles of the children in the archive? This is something Sister Ann herself has troubled herself with. “Do we really know the individual story behind the smiles? Maybe some of them really might be happy? Maybe they were really happy to see us?”¹⁹ Photographs only go so far in making us aware of the pain of others. We know that there is suffering. We know that they have endured hardships. But what kind of hardships? What do photographs not show?

These questions are most explicitly evoked in a particular photograph of a little girl, who looks confusingly, even fearfully, at the person standing in front of her.²⁰ The person is cut off from the camera save his/her hand holding a marker. Sister Ann encouragingly beckons at her, encouragingly smiles at her. But the little girl is oblivious to Sister Ann’s warmth. Her eyebrows are furrowed. Her eyes are sunken with stories. She looks with distrust at the hands captured in the photograph (the hands of whom? Is he/she a Cambodian? A western aid worker?). The next immediate photograph in the set

¹⁷ Ibid 7/8/1980.

¹⁸ Sontag 14.

¹⁹ Sister Ann, telephone interview, 4/19/2011.

²⁰ See image 2.

is of this little girl, digging her hand into a bowl, staring straight in the camera.²¹ She engages us, the spectators. Whereas before we were out of her periphery (rightfully so, we stood aside the previous years; why do we care now?), at this instant she looks directly at us. We are drawn into her world for a second. Yet her eyes sadly and questioningly look at us, asking us what we are doing there when we did not give a care before. It is too late; the little girls' eyes tell us that she has already experienced too much -- she has experienced not being remembered. However, that is her life and she has to take it with stride. Furthermore, as spectators, we cannot even begin to understand what she has gone through, what it means to have our lives defined by unrecorded agony. All we, the privileged spectator, can do is capture a glimpse of her pain.

The best way to compensate for what goes unrecorded is to integrate the recorded into social memory. In that way, at the very least, we become aware that such suffering is happening. Sister Ann endearingly and despairingly writes in her diary about a young boy, "her Christopher," whose parents passed away; he is left alone but is brought to her by family friends. "Evidently my Christopher died during the night for this morning he and his friends were gone -- no sign of his presence."²² Sister Ann strikes at the all too painful reality that people will disappear without warning; this is normal (and perhaps that is the greatest injustice). She strikes at the fact that many things go unawared in the world. Yet we can find solace in the idea that though we, man, may not see the hidden suffering of others, there is a higher authority who witnesses them, who can understand the pain behind, say, the young girl's eyes. And this is where photographs play a vital role: we know that there is suffering -- the photograph is proof of it -- and just because some suffering is not recorded does not mean that we should turn a blind eye. In order to achieve redemption, we need to integrate these sufferings into our social memory.

²¹ See image 3.

²² Sister Ann's diary: 4/5/1980.

VI.

The photographs of Sister Ann taken by an anonymous Japanese photographer play a key role in portraying Sister Ann's dual role as both the spectator and the divine eye – this is essential for integrating the set into our social memory. Sister Ann is where we, the spectators, cannot be, though try as she might to draw us into her experiences. In this way, she plays the role of the divine, the higher authority who *does* have a right to judge (which we spectators cannot). This is encapsulated in the first photograph of the archive, of Sister Ann standing in front of the aid workers' supply truck.²³ Her white robe causes her to blend into the daylight, into the background of the photograph, giving her an aura of the divine. As she bends over, the Roman Catholic cross is prominently displayed; this evokes the idea that the only way to deal with suffering is to turn to the spiritual. "I didn't have to bring the word of Jesus Christ because I saw very quickly that with the Buddhist tradition, they have their own deep spirituality, deep inner peace. We live not so much by words but by reaching out to people and being present."²⁴ The cross also invokes the idea that there is a higher power who observes and judges all man-made agony (those that are recorded and those that are not). This divine authority knows not only one kind of religion; it is a divine authority that transcends man's understandings and creations. And Sister Ann, through her words and her images, translates this understanding to us.

At the same time, Sister Ann is still just a spectator to the suffering – she has not endured the four years of genocide and the subsequent years of loss and disruption. "Images have been reproached for being a way of watching suffering at a distance but watching up close... is still just watching. Some of the reproaches made against images of atrocity are not different from sight itself... sight can be turned off."²⁵ In this aspect, Sister Ann is in the same category as us, the spectators of the photographs, and

²³ See image 4.

²⁴ Sister Ann's diary: 4/19/2011.

²⁵ Sontag 117-118.

she acknowledges this; she recognizes how she can never understand the survivors' pain although she is there to witness it firsthand. "The people seldom cry – they will break into a laugh or just be stone face. As a rule, when we smile, they will smile back. Wish I knew what was happening inside."²⁶ She can only observe and examine their pain.

Sister Ann's dual role is perhaps best epitomized in the photograph of her standing with the children of the camp, who smile back or who look confusedly at the camera.²⁷ Again, she vaguely fades into the background. This gives her an air of holiness and sets her apart from the rest of the children. Through this photograph, there is an observable and irrevocable chasm between her and the children, between her story and their story. She still only observes suffering, even though she is part of the photograph. Her religious robe thus highlights her duality: she judges what is being photographed (she was there, we were not; she saw their pain, we did not) and, at the same time, she stands in stark contrast to them (she may have been there but she was not there during the genocide and she does not have to live in a destroyed country).

It is because of her dual role that the public can access her memory all the more easily. By reading about her experiences as a spectator, the photographs are set in a context that we can understand. Since Sister Ann was actually there, she has an authority over the memories. Her diary provides the public with context; without it, the images are dead. For instance, in the aforementioned photograph, groups of smiling children are shown; their troubles would escape us if not for Sister Ann's memories. She describes how the continuing war caused the refugees to frequently pack up and move from one camp to another. "The people look at us with fear... where will they go? The people are so afraid – they are being moved into mine fields."²⁸ With knowledge of this dangerous and fearful reality, we can

²⁶ Sister Ann's diary: 4/29/1980.

²⁷ See image 5.

²⁸ Ibid 6/5/1980.

understand that there is more behind the smiles the children wear in the photograph; we can understand the injustice of what is and is not being photographed. And we, too, question what is going to happen to them. This is only made possible because we are able to take Sister Ann's private memories and make them our own.

V.

Part of the reason why we can integrate these photographs and Sister Ann's experiences into public memory is because these photographs are simply being recorded "for those involved in the events" and not reported "to the rest of the world."²⁹ As Berger argues, this is important for incorporating photographs into social memory. "Memory works radially, that is to say with an enormous number of associations all leading to the same event. If we want to put a photograph back into the context of... social memory, we have to respect the laws of memory. We have to situate the printed photograph so that it acquires something of the surprising conclusiveness of that which *was* and *is*."³⁰ The photographer displays the bare facts of the event, the actual reality of life as it was at that moment in time. He addresses those suffering. He does not have an ulterior motive save to capture a moment as it was for the survivors. Through the camera, he records Sister Ann's memories; he displays the suffering that man does not have a right to judge. However, man does have "an obligation to 'examine.'"³¹ That is, "one should feel obliged to think about what it means to look at them, about the capacity to assimilate what they show."³² With the aid of Sister Ann's diary, the spectator can understand the photographs in narrated time; he/she can read the recorded events against her text and can contemplate the meaning of the events captured.

²⁹ Berger 58.

³⁰ Ibid 60-61.

³¹ Sontag 92.

³² Ibid 95.

However, photographers face a serious challenge in that they are incapable of locking the frame around their viewpoint alone. Photographs cannot produce images reducible to the photographer's viewpoint; it cannot capture the scope of the event. The camera's very function is limited in that it only responds to itself; it does not respond to the photographer or to the photographed person. Thus, how does one capture the expanse of suffering? Perhaps this is the point: spectators can see but spectators could never understand the "what was there" without having experienced it. The frame of the photographs is indicative of how the very act of being a spectator entails a lack of complete understanding.

Thus, although photographs freeze the reality of "what was," they cannot convey the raw feeling of suffering. The photographs in the set do not capture how, during this period in Cambodia, there was much suffering on a collective level. In all of this collective suffering, each person has his or her own story; they ultimately suffer alone. The only way to understand that there is loneliness in the images is through Sister Ann's diary. She talks of "the 14-15-16 year old orphans who are alone, the mothers whose husbands are killed... educated men who cannot go on to school, women alone with their children, young children and adults utterly alone."³³ Yet when we look at the photograph of Sister Ann standing with the children, some of whom are smiling, some of whom stare into the camera confused, some who are not looking into the camera but instead are caught with closed eyes -- how are we to understand who is alone? Who is struggling to survive by themselves? Who has lost his/her family and friends? These questions only arise because of Sister Ann's text, and that is why her diary is important -- it frames the pictures in a way that the images themselves cannot do. "[Photographs] are not much

³³ Sister Ann's diary: 5/10/1980.

help if the task is to understand. Narratives can make us understand. Photographs do something else: they haunt us.”³⁴ Photographs shock us and, with context, they leave an enduring print in our minds.

IV.

The power of photographs -- of genocide, of suffering, of trauma -- lies in the fact that they stop time. Sister Ann kept these photographs tucked away for 30 years and yet the photographs still bring these moments to the present. This is why photographs can depict trauma so faithfully. Trauma, like photographs, is not linear; it is not in the realm of horizontal empty time. Time in photographs processes this history, space, this sensory and life in a way that we cannot rationalize. Through her photographs and diary, Sister Ann is trying to convey to the public how present this trauma is for her and how recent the events in the images should seem recent for us. The photographs do not only convey the trauma of the sufferers in the photographs; the photographs can rekindle and can transmit trauma to others.

Perhaps those who may be most affected by photographs of this sort are those who are closely intertwined with the sufferers in the pictures, that is, the children of survivors. Marianne Hirsch argues that “postmemory is distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection... Postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated.”³⁵ Thus, social memory can be most successfully integrated in this generation because of their close connection to the survivors. They grew up observing the trauma of their parents, which makes transmission of memory possible.

³⁴ Sontag 89.

³⁵ Marianne Hirsch, “Mourning and Postmemory,” *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory*, Cambridge: Harvard, 1997: 22.

Therefore, these photographs allow us, the second generation, to see “what was” so we can imagine our parents’ memories in its truth. My parents were survivors of the Khmer Rouge and they lived in a Thai refugee camp for four years. They have never spoken about their experiences. They have never drawn out images of what they endured, thus when I look at these photographs, I simply transpose my parents into the frame and I go back in time, this time that seems so present. The photograph of the women walking alone with the children reflects a stillness that presents a haunting feeling.³⁶ Each person is alone although they are together. Both women are looking down; one holds a baby to her side. Two children stand in the far back – one is in the midst of walking, the other stands with his hand over his head. And then there is a little girl standing to the left simply holding a bowl. Each character in this image is in the middle of something – we do not know what. We do not know their stories. We can sense the eeriness in the photograph though -- the eeriness which resides in their solitude, in their past and in their present. They do not engage us; they do not see us nor do they care to see us looking at them. We were not there when they needed us. If not for these photographs, we would not and could not know how these women walked alone, how they ignored us because we ignored them. These photographs are meant to display to man the sorrowful consequences of his actions; they are meant to haunt him.

Thus, with these images in mind, I can now see my mother and my grandmother walking around the Thai refugee camps idly, with only their memories to accompany them and only their fear of the future leering after them. And, like the women in the picture, I know they suffered alone. I know they have never spoken to one another about their experiences. They did not know how to deal with their suffering -- they did not know how to express it -- so they silently agreed to carry on. They did not know how to share their pain because their pain was so unique to themselves. Just like we can see the

³⁶ See image 6.

loneliness in the eyes of these women, I can still see the loneliness in the eyes of my own family today. They have “a past that will neither fade away nor be integrated into the present.”³⁷ And I, their daughter, their granddaughter, could never understand what they went through, so they do not speak of it to me. All I have to understand their narratives are photographs and other people’s stories of the past.

IV.

In this paper, I have argued that Sister Ann’s set of photographs presents to man his wrongdoings – it shows “this is what man does, this is the suffering man brings on to one another.” Because of this, man does not have the right to judge the photographs. These moments are recorded to remind man that there is a higher authority that judges these events, that judges him. Man cannot judge the photographs until he stops making war, until he stops inflicting pain on others. Through her own role in the photographs, Sister Ann presents this understanding to us, the spectators, the privileged members of mankind. She brings her memories to us. She wants us to realize that “we, each of us, has the divine within us and we are called to contemplation, compassion, caring and community. Yes, as long as there is “us” and “them”, we will have wars. But, spiritually, we are all one, we have the same creator, we seek the same peace.”³⁸ Sister Ann recognizes the necessity of incorporating her memories and the survivors’ memories into social memory, into our memory. If man remembers the agony of the past, perhaps war will stop. Until then, all we can do is stare into the suffering eyes of survivors, to try to understand what happened to them and to admire them for carrying on.

In the photo archive, there is an image of children swimming, splashing, in what looks like a river.³⁹ This “river” is in fact the very same field where the little girl stood in the image first discussed in this paper. There is a transgression from the little girl standing alone in a dry field to the children

³⁷ Ibid 40.

³⁸ Sister Ann’s email to Carol Te: 4/19/2011.

³⁹ See image 7.

playing with one another in water. Each child essentially has a unique suffering; simultaneously, as the children stand together in the water, it is evident that there is a common bond that brings them together. The pain from genocide is large and distinct and all of the children share it. Some of the children's faces are obscured – we cannot see their expressions. The darkness that veils their faces and figures shows us how they were forgotten and continue to be forgotten during their suffering. Their pain remains unnoticed by the rest of the world.

By contrast, the faces that we do see are filled with smiles and laughter. Each child in the river is doing something different. The beautiful part about this photograph is how the children “invoke the miracle of survival;” they portray the strength of man in light of all of the destruction and suffering present in the set of photographs.⁴⁰ They show that, despite all the hardships and agony these children endured and keep enduring, they will keep smiling. They still feel the life, the freshness, the invigoration of the water. As they wait for man to realize and to understand the destruction he reaps on his own kind, they will continue to live, to breathe.

⁴⁰ Sontag 87.

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Image 1:



Image 2



Image 3



Image 4:

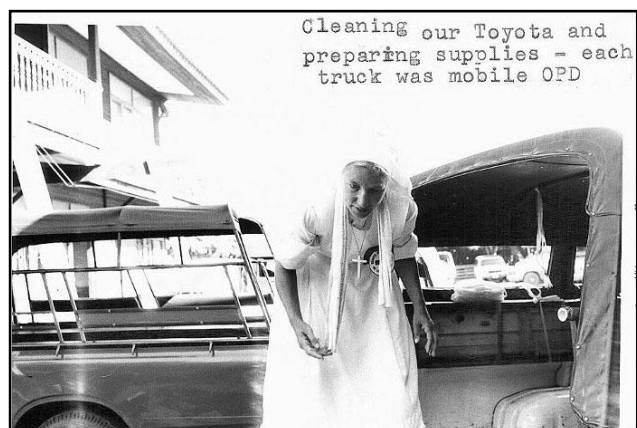


Image 5:



Image 6:



Image 7:

