

Cambodia Diary Introduction

"How do we make sense of war - it doesn't make sense." This is a statement I heard recently and have been reflecting on each day.

Another reflection I have heard in various ways is that if the war is fought there (where ever that "there" may be), we do not have to worry about it happening here.

Over 30 years ago, I had the opportunity to serve as a Volunteer Red Cross nurse in a Cambodian Refugee camp, Nong Samet, at the border of Cambodia and Thailand. Because the war was still very active, we lived in Thailand and traveled across the border into the camp in Cambodia each day.

When I returned home to Wisconsin, I received calls that I was away for 5 months and they really needed me at work. Consequently, I thought I had put my refugee camp experiences behind me. The photos and simple daily diary were tucked away and never looked at for all these years.

However, like so many of us that served in the Viet Nam era, the war did not stay "there"; we brought the war home with us. The war continued here in our lives and unconsciously at times, never left us.

In 1979 and 1980, many refugee camps were developing along the Cambodian border. Truthfully, I did not know the history of these camps. I volunteered to serve because there were 1000's of people flocking to the border just to survive. Newspapers and journals showed lots of photos. The refugees had no home, no food and people and children were dying daily. Every Cambodian family was affected in one way or another.

I personally did not even think of the political or other causes of these devastating circumstances affecting the refugees. Our focus as a medical team was to provide basic medical care and food to a starving people.

Only now am I reading the many books about this tragic situation. I am overwhelmed by the complexity of this sad time in Cambodian history.

The refugee camps were primitive and offering only the basic needs of survival. The people were weak and worn out from years of turmoil.

But as I put this photo journal together with my brother Jerry, sharing with him my thoughts and reflections, I looked at the pictures carefully. There were so many mothers who seemed lost and alone. There were children smiling and greeting us as we came to the camp each day. Young people wanted to work and learn from us so they could use their English and perhaps get a job. There were experiences of hope and healing and days of much suffering and succumbing to inevitable death of the weakest refugees. Even I got caught up in the depression and hopelessness at times.

It is my hope that these photos can help bring some healing to people who view them. Some of the photos show the strength and serenity of the refugees. Many show their resourcefulness and determination to better their lives.

I also want to make people aware that if we do not look at the big picture, the long term results of war, namely all the refugees, we will keep repeating the same patterns of war over and over and never recognize the often horrific consequences of war that can last a long time.

Peace! That is what all of us want and those of us who have had our feet on the ground in the war zone know that all our choices in life must be focused on peace for all people. We are all one. We are all sons and daughters, fathers and mothers, sisters and brothers. When one of us is suffering, we all suffer.

As you view the pictures, look at faces, eyes, expressions. Remember each of us has a story. Each of these people and children has a story. Where are they now? What were they thinking then?

I only know my heart and soul will always be with the Cambodian people I have met and loved.

View my diary on the web at www.desktopangel.com/diary

Sr. Ann Catherine Veierstahler, SCSJA, RN, BSN