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MARILLAC COLLEGE FORUM

Sister Students Share Letters From Soldiers in Viet Nam

By Sister M. Giovanni, S.C.C.

"This is more like Christmas should be, no tinsel, phoniness or commercialism -- just the pure giving of self. The loneliness of the first Christmas will be duplicated here."

With these words the Rev. H. T. Lavin, Chaplain of the 3rd Marine Division, described Christmas in Viet Nam in his letter to Sister Marilita, S.C.C. and Sister M. Jean, S.C.C., who directed the "Letters to Viet Nam" Christmas project.

Father Lavin told how he distributed the letters sent by Marillac College students to the men who attended a Memorial Mass for 16 Marines killed shortly before Christmas.

Letters of the soldiers in reply varied in tone and technique but not in effect. Ringing from an uncertain "I really don't know what to say because I never wrote to a Sister before," to a friendly "I hope you'll be pleased to hear from a lonesome 'Jughead.'" all the replies were appreciative.

Lieutenant Jerry Merna expressed himself to Sister Francine, D.C. this way: "Your profound concern for those of us who are here is truly heart warming. It is just such faith and gratitude so freely and sincerely expressed that makes us feel that what we are doing is all so worthwhile and necessary."

Most of the soldiers contrasted the Sisters' concern with that of other United States' groups. Referring to college students at Berkeley, California, Lieutenant C. L. Pedersen told Sister M. Luanne, S.C.C., "At times we wish that they would come over here and take our place so we can go back there and see what they got to complain about." LT MERNA

"We hear and read so often of the dissident elements back home," observed Lieutenant Merna, "but letters such as yours reduce their impact a hundredfold. It is your concern and the faith of so many like you, that is of consequence to me and my fellow

Marines here. You have indeed made it clear that there are people who care."

Despite the fact that these Marines and their comrades are undergoing suffering, fear and danger of all types, their sense of humor has not totally disappeared. To Sister Marilita, S.C.C., Corporal R. W. Moore explained his situation this way: "Yep, I'm afraid... I am a marine -- those individuals who smell, swear, smoke, drink and fight. At the present time I am, I'm afraid, doing a little of the first, some of the second, a lot of the third, not so much of the fourth, and a heck of a lot of the last."

These letters give glimpses of the inside story of a war. "But it's all worth it," each one echoes. PFC Daniel G. Toro spoke for many when he wrote to Sister Quinn, R.H.S.J.: "I'd do it over and over again just to see another nation be able to say, 'One nation, under God, with liberty and justice for all.'"

(Note: Pictures below (taken by Jerry Merna) include three of those mentioned above: Rev. H. T. Lavin, Chaplain, 3d Marine Division, 1stLt Jerry Merna, and 1stLt Carl L. Pedersen, Counter-Intelligence Officer)



Taking a break in our “luxurious” Officers Club at Hue, Vietnam, Navy (Catholic) Chaplains (“Double for Hubbell”--his favorite jest) and Chaplain (Commander, USN) H.T. Lavin offer a “toast.”



Chaplain (Commander) US Navy Hubbell and 1stLt G. F. Merna at Phu Bai, Vietnam 1967) (picture by GF Merna)



19 March 1967, PhuBai, Vietnam: Chaplain (Father) H.T. Lavin, Chaplain, 3rd Marine Division, saying Mass on Palm Sunday



19 March 1967, PhuBai, Vietnam: Father H.T. Lavin, 3rd Marine Division Chaplain, distributes Holy Communion at Mass for 3d Marine Division Marines



Dec. 1966-PuBai, Vietnam: 1stLt C. L. Pedersen, Counter-Intelligence, conducts inspection at Vietnamese Hamlet with 3dMarDiv CAC Unit Patrol.



Dec. 1966, PhuBai, Vietnam: Village Combined Action Company (CAC) Unit under Lt. Petersen with Vietnamese interpreter¹

¹ According to British counterinsurgency expert Sir Robert Thompson, the Marines understood the duality of combat and protecting the civil population best. "Of all the United States forces [in Vietnam] the Marine Corps alone made a serious attempt to achieve permanent and lasting results in their tactical area of responsibility by seeking to protect the rural population." Source: (<https://sites.google.com/site/flynnbook/cac-history>)



PhuBai, Vietnam, Dec. 1966: Capt. Kolb, 2dLts. McGaw, Joe Manz, Burke, Krieger in "O" Club



PhuBai, Vietnam, Dec. 1966: Center: Captain Kolb, 2dLts Merna and Manz, "O" Club



Dong Ha RVN, Sep. 1966: Air Terminal - 2dLts Joe Manz & Jerry Merna



Apr. 8, 1967, Cocoa Island, Vietnam: Marine Lieutenants Jerry Merna, Sam Kerr and "Tony" (can't recall his last name) returning to Phu Bai from Cocoa Island



Vietnam 1967: 1stLt Gerald F. Merna with captured Chinese M1947 Nagant .62mm Carbine and bayonet. (Note: Lt. Merna brought this weapon home with him and still has it in his possession).