

Operation Smile - Vietnam 2001

By Greg Samson, RN, ENC(c)

One of the advantages of being a pediatric emergency room nurse is the opportunity to travel to developing areas of the world as a participant in an international medical mission. Such an opportunity was extended to me when I travelled to Can Tho, Vietnam earlier this year with Operation Smile (OS).

Operation Smile is an international, private, not-for-profit volunteer medical services organization. Each year, OS provides reconstructive surgery and related health care to indigent children at

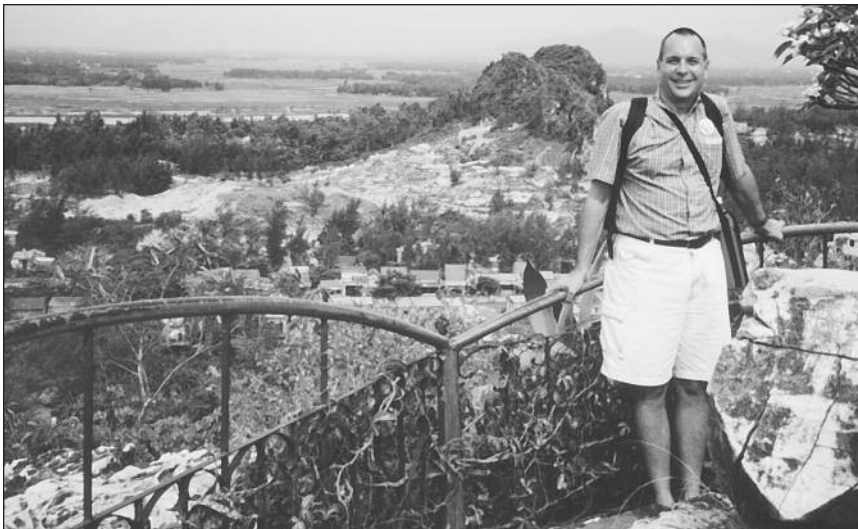
30 different mission sites involving 20 countries. Each international team of 30 to 40 volunteers consists of doctors, nurses, speech pathologists, and other volunteers. They are brought together for two weeks at a mission site for surgeries including cleft lip and palate repair, burn revisions, and other reconstructive surgeries. As many children as safely possible are seen during five to six days of surgery.

I joined the mission after a 28-hour flight, followed by a five-hour bus trip to Can Tho in the Mekong Delta. The first aspect of the mission was three days of

screening, during which 240 patients were assessed for surgery. The families huddled in the shade of every nook and cranny along the hospital to escape the 38°C heat of the sun, as they waited for their turn to be screened by the nurses and doctors of OS. The difficult task of selecting the patients who are candidates for surgery was the responsibility of the team leaders. The final surgery lists were posted on Saturday, a day of anticipation and mixed emotions for the families discovering either that their child had been chosen for surgery, or that they were to return home and hope that next year their child would be chosen. Those children with more unique or complex problems could not be operated on due to lack of facilities or equipment within the country.

Sunday, my sixth day, I was off to relax. A group of us from the OS team got up at 0400 to go to the floating market on the Mekong River. During this seven-hour long trip, we were able to see how the people of Vietnam are one with the river. In the late afternoon, after a long nap, my roommate and I rented a motorcycle with a driver for two hours at a cost of 30,000 dong (\$3.00 Cdn.) to drive around the city and see the sites of Can Tho.

Monday, day seven, began early, up at 0530 to arrive at the hospital for 0700. Surgery began at 0730 with the first



Author Greg Samson in Danang, Vietnam, with China Beach in the background.



Above left, one part of the hospital in Can Tho. Right, patients try to avoid the 38° heat while awaiting screening.

patients arriving in post-op by 0900. There were five surgical teams, so a child left the OR every 30 to 45 minutes and then remained in the recovery room until awakening, enabling them to move to the post-op area down the hall. In post-op, three nurses worked together to provide care in three small rooms, each containing three or four cots with wooden slats on them. The hospital only had straw mats to place on the cots for the comfort of the expected 40 to 45 patients each day. Each cot had two to three patients at a time, depending on the child's size. All children were supposed to arrive in post-op with an IV infusing. However, some of the children were able to pull out their IVs despite their elbow restraints. As post-op filled up during the day, the temperature reached the mid-40s. The rooms were noisy with the sounds of children crying and their family members trying to talk with them through the windows. The pace continued until we finally returned to our hotel at 2130. This was our schedule for five days straight.


On Friday, day 11, the final cases were done in the morning. A total of 168 children and their families have had their lives changed forever. The smiles on the children's faces make every moment of the gruelling week worth it.

Friday afternoon the team worked together to clean, prepare, and pack all the medical equipment for shipping back to the USA, before returning to Ho Chi Min City. One doctor and I stayed in Can Tho to do follow-up post-op Saturday, Sunday and Monday. One hundred and ninety follow-ups were done in nine hours of return clinic visits, three hours each morning. Lips and palates were checked and dressings on burn revisions were changed. A few children would require follow-up the next week with a plastic surgeon in Hanoi in northern Vietnam. OS provided transportation for these patients for their follow-up.

After working 14 days, I took a week to travel around

southern and central Vietnam. The country is beautiful and the people of Vietnam are very resourceful and hard-working. I found visiting the various sites that experienced heavy fighting 30 years ago, during the war, rather overwhelming. It is so hard to believe that this country was virtually destroyed by bombs and Agent Orange during the war. As I walked through the streets of the towns and cities, the children were particularly friendly to westerners they saw. Their favourite word is 'hello' and I could not help but smile and say hello back to them when it rang out from the children along the street. When they realized I was Canadian, they welcomed me with open arms.

Every mission has different qualities and features, but two things are constant: the dedication and commitment of the team members, and the appreciation of the children and their families. The key word with OS is flexibility, as each day is never the same as the day before. Although the mission is challenging, it is always rewarding. The smile on a child's face, when they give you a hug and kiss before they go home with a new outlook on life, leaves a lasting impression on your heart.

It was an honour to be chosen as a member of Operation Smile, whose ongoing goal is "Changing lives...one smile at a time." 



Top photo: Empty beds in the post-op room. Above: The first day post-op with recovering patients, two to a bed.