

One Man's Witness:
Ted Stuebaker in Vietnam

This dramatic reading traces the life of Ted Stuebaker, from his early years in Ohio through his service in Brethren Volunteer Service in Vietnam, to his death in April 1971 at the hands of North Vietnamese soldiers. For three readers.

Ted Stuebaker: *(seated at a table reading aloud a letter as he writes it; guitar is propped up against table; spotlight is on him, if possible)*

Dear friends,

I find it difficult to write this letter, realizing that while I want to be congenial and informative, I also feel the need to express realistically some of my frustrations and thoughts concerning my present situation.

Please know that I feel most fortunate to be able to work here in Vietnam as a volunteer agriculturalist as my Brethren Volunteer Service project with Vietnam Christian Service.

Second only to my family, you as representatives of the West Milton Church of the Brethren are responsible for my thoughts and actions concerning conscientious objection to the military, my pacifistic views, and my volunteer service.

Without the church, as skeptical as I am about it now, I might find myself in a uniform as part of a giant military machine whose reason for existence seems based on economics and a big myth.

Narrator: *(at lectern across stage from Ted; spotlight switched to narrator)* Ted Stuebaker was born and raised on his family farm near Union, Ohio. With his eight brothers and sisters, he did his share of the work on the farm, while being fully involved in activities at school and in his local church. He was baptized into West Milton Church of the Brethren at the age of ten. In high school, he was a good student and was involved in many ways, including the school's Future Farmers group and nearly all its sports programs. He lettered in track and football.

Ted Stuebaker: The meaninglessness, the wastefulness, and the non-necessity of this war is outweighed only by its inhumane effects, both here and in the States. I have an idea that most of you who hear these words are sympathetic to my thoughts and feelings. However, it saddens me to know, as beautiful as are all your intentions, that you are probably doing considerably more to further U.S. military and imperialistic policy here through the taxes you continue to pay every year, than you are toward the cause of peace and reconciliation. Since being here, I have come to see and realize the tremendous influence of the American military and U.S. aid money that has literally been poured into this corrupt country and government.

Narrator: After high school, Ted Studebaker attended Manchester College, where he worked his way through school and earned a four-year degree in three years. He then went on to get a masters' degree in social work at the University of Florida. Once during this time, while speaking at a Brethren congregation, Ted held up a newspaper picture of a starving, homeless child—a victim of war. He read the accompanying article which said, "Hunting was good today in the Mekong Delta region. U.S. Marines bagged 45 of the enemy, wounded dozens more and completely wiped out a small village."

"Hunting was good today!" mocked Ted. "Just like the sportsman who comes back from a day of rabbit and pheasant shooting...so many rabbits, so many pheasants... he lays them out for all to see. The dehumanizing process of war concerns me deeply. What can I do about man's inhumanity to man?"

Ted Studebaker:

I do not pretend to understand all the whys and wherefores of this crisis, but one thing stands out clearly in my mind. This war is immoral and wrong, and the burden of blame is upon the U.S. military, the U.S. government, and the U.S. people. I believe there is a lot of truth in the statement that the killing and the destruction will stop only when American public opinion demands it.

These are the thoughts that are heavy on my mind right now that I feel the necessity to share with you. It is my hope that reason will once again be restored in the hearts and minds of responsible men and women. I express my appreciation to those who have shown interest in my struggles and joys here in Vietnam. Please know that I am in good health and adequate security.

I would welcome your responses and comments and will do my best to respond to personal letters if you have questions. I send my best wishes and regards to all.

Working for Peace,
S. Ted Studebaker
Volunteer Agriculturalist, Vietnam Christian Service
De Linh, Vietnam

Narrator: Having completed his college course work, Ted was eligible for the draft in 1969, which was at the height of the Vietnam war. Because of his Christian convictions, he chose to register as a conscientious objector and do alternative service rather than go into the military. Entering Brethren Volunteer Service in the fall of 1969, Ted chose a project in Vietnam as his place of service. As he left for that war-torn nation, he took with him one suitcase, a small tape recorder and an old guitar he called "his best buddy."

Mr. Peters: (*Spotlight on another part of the stage*)

Dear Mr. Studebaker,

I read your recent letter which was printed in the Troy Daily News, and to say the least, was very disappointed. I do not know what the Christian Service organization you work with stands for, but after reading your criticism of our nation and our government, I wonder if it is indeed "Christian."

Your comments that the war is "immoral" and the wrong side is that of America and the U.S. people, etc., sound exactly like the song and dance of the Communists. Apparently their propaganda has gotten to you. How can you be over there and work with the people who have asked us for help, when you feel the enemy is right and our country is wrong?

Narrator: Ted chose to work among the Montagnard people in Vietnam. These people had historically been the outcasts of Vietnam, and now found that their home areas in the highlands of Vietnam had become the free firing range for both Vietcong raiders and American and South Vietnamese bombers. Ted came to feel that their very survival as a people was at stake. Soon after his arrival in the village of Di Linh, South Vietnam, he saw eight small children blown apart by a shell which landed in the center of the village.

Mr. Peters:

Mr. Studebaker, if you are a Christian, then you no doubt read the Bible. Have you read in Romans 13 and I Peter 2 about honoring the government? We have a great country. President Nixon is a fine man...one who honors and trusts in God, one who is trying to do what is best for all Americans. The real enemy for you and for us is Communism. If you are indeed trying to do some service for mankind in Southeast Asia, then please, for the sake of the Vietnamese, for the sake of Americans who are very concerned about those very unfortunate people, for the sake of our own freedom and liberty... and for God's sake...get your views straight.

Mr. Doug Peters
Troy, Ohio

Narrator: Ted scarcely seemed like a foreigner as he lived and worked among the Montagnard people. Perhaps he fit in so well because his tastes were simple, he quickly became proficient in the language of both the Vietnamese and the Montagnards, and because he felt genuinely enriched by the lives of those around him, seeking to learn from them.

It was easy to see how well he got along as he visited with his neighbors, local officials and other church workers. His service project involved helping people increase the yield of the native rice, which they preferred over the new "improved" varieties; building a brooder house and raising chicks for distribution

to the villagers; and providing assistance to the local people in establishing a cooperative store. Another highlight of his work in Vietnam was the chance to meet Ven Pak, a native of Hong Kong and a volunteer with Church World Service. After knowing one another for two years, they made plans to be married the spring of 1971.

Ted Studebaker:

Dear Mr. Peters,

I want to thank you for taking the time to write to me concerning the letter I wrote to my church some months back and which was printed in the Troy newspaper last March. Even though our views and beliefs seem very far apart concerning war, peace, and Christian responsibility, I see this as a great opportunity for me to better understand how Christians, like yourself, feel about this very important issue of our country's involvement in Vietnam and Southeast Asia.

Please know that I have read and reread your letter several times, and shared it with friends working here. I feel it would be worthless for me to continue any debate by letter, since both our views seem to be unswayable, and a letter is no way to discuss such great issues.

Narrator: Ted's two years of volunteer service were up at the beginning of April 1971. Instead of coming home, however, Ted felt that he needed to remain in Vietnam one more year. His mother said that "he told us by tape that he'd become so involved with the people and various projects that he just couldn't leave right then."

Just after making his decision to stay, Ted and Ven Pak were married. The best man at his wedding was a Montagnard co-worker and the service itself was entirely in the Montagnard language.

The Di Linh area was one of the most risky areas in which to live in that part of Vietnam. Ted never seemed nervous, however, as long as there did not need to be travel on the roads at night or so long as one did not get detained while traveling too close to American military convoys. The area was frequently shelled and sometimes children and other innocent people would step on mines laid by one side or the other in the war. "Sometimes," he commented, "it seems like this whole war is run on a bunch of mistakes."

Ted Studebaker:

Mr. Peters, there's just one point I want to make clear to you. I do not "feel the enemy is right" any more than I feel the U.S. military is "right" here. I believe strongly in trying follow the example of Jesus Christ as best I know how. Above all, Christ taught me to love all people, including enemies, and to return good for evil, and that all people are brothers and sisters in

Christ. I condemn all war and conscientiously refuse to take part in it in any active or violent way. I believe love is a stronger and more enduring power than hatred for my fellow men, regardless of who they are or what they believe.

You probably think I'm pretty idealistic and by your letter, indicate that I'm a pretty mixed up kid. But, I cannot apologize for any part of the letter I wrote to my church, since it well represents honestly and sincerely my feelings and concerns about this particular situation.

I do appreciate your letter for reasons you'll probably never know, Mr. Peters. I hope that reason and understanding and wisdom will guide our thoughts and actions in whatever we think or do.

Thank you for inquiring about my safety. Please know that I am in excellent health and adequate security. I know I am a fortunate man and life is great to me.

Sincerely,
Ted Studebaker
Di Linh, Vietnam April 25, 1971

Narrator: *(as Ted quietly leaves stage)* On the night of April 25, 1971 the Vietnam Christian Service unit at Di Linh, South Vietnam was shelled with B-40 rockets, blasted with a plastic charge, and raided by North Vietnamese soldiers. Three women, including Ven Pak, made it into the bunker of the building and were not harmed; Ted, still in his bedroom, was found by the soldiers and shot to death.

(After a pause; spotlight table and guitar, with empty chair) His mother said, "If Ted had known this was to happen, I'm sure he would have gone right ahead. In one way, his death is an even greater witness than had he lived."

His wife wrote, "I'm sure all of you share my grief, but grieve more for those who do not understand what he did."

[**Soloist** could sing, "Brave Man From Ohio," by Andy Murray.]

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by David Radcliff
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