



CARE PACKAGE

A green medical draftee to Vietnam, WVU alumnus Dr. Ed Shahady helps create a field hospital to save refugee children

Submitted Photos

Above: Nurses and children at Hoa Khanh Children's Hospital, near Da Nang, Vietnam, on the coast of the South China Sea. Nurse Sandy is standing. Nurse "Gwen" Ngyen (seated) fled to the United States after the fall of South Vietnam, bringing with her several Vietnamese children whom she adopted. She lives in San Jose, Calif., where she works as a nurse.

Left: Dr. Ed Shahady at the hospital with one of his young patients.

Below: Shahady, (left), his friend and hospital co-founder Dr. Jim Wilkerson (right), a fellow West Virginian and WVU graduate, and three of the nurses pose in front of the hospital.

Far left: Hoa Khanh Children's Hospital began in 1965 as a tent and 10 beds near an encampment of 1,300 U.S. Marines. The doctors recruited Navy Sea Bees to build a permanent structure that lasted the duration of the war. After Shahady and Wilkerson left, other WVU-trained doctors succeeded them.



Dr. Ed

Shahady

BY JIM BISSETT

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Dr. Ed Shahady was working too hard in 1965 to give much thought to Vietnam.

Oh, he knew a military action was brewing in the southeast Asian country, and that President Johnson was stepping up U.S. troop involvement there.

But he had more immediate, pressing concerns. Fresh out of the WVU School of Medicine, he was just beginning his family practice residency in the blue-collar end of northeastern Ohio, at Akron City Hospital.

That part of Ohio wasn't that far away from his native Fairmont in north-central West Virginia. Akron's way of life wasn't that far removed from West Virginia's, either.

Hardworking Akron families had husbands and fathers who poured steel in the mills and slapped together tires at Goodyear, not unlike the ones back home who carved out coal in the mines or packed bottles at the Owens-Illinois glass plant.

A lot of them were from West Virginia, anyway, migrating north to the factories when the mines tapped out.

Shahady could identify. He wasn't some pampered, trust-fund physician: He worked for everything he got, slogging his way through college stocking shelves and sweeping floors

at Speedway Market, the landmark Fairmont grocery store owned and operated by his father, Joe.

As he settled into the bustling hospital, staffing the emergency room or making rounds through hallways lit by flickering fluorescent lights, he often thought that the only difference between Fairmont and Akron was the accent.

But before 1965 would end, the 26-year-old physician would find himself in a place that was utterly foreign, in every sense of the word.

He'd be in war-torn South Vietnam, where flashing lights in the tree line meant bullet holes in the backs and bellies of working-class kids from Fairmont and Akron, and other places where draft cards and high school diplomas marched in unison.

The native language at first would be nothing but a jacked-up jumble of swooping syllables, musical and grating all at once.

And he would attempt to practice medicine and heal children in a country where parents sometimes had to let a sick child die ... so their others could live.

Along the way, something miraculous would happen. A hospital would transform from a tent and few cots into a 100-bed operation, one that would stay that way until the country fell to the North Vietnamese 10 years later.

With his friend, Jim Wilkerson, a fellow West Virginian and WVU med school graduate, Shahady would see that the children of war would have at least a fighting chance at life.

Of docs and draft boards

"I was getting ready to do my residency in '65 when I heard from the draft board," he said by telephone from his Lighthouse Point, Fla., home. Now 62, he's a semi-retired clinical professor of family medicine at the University of Miami.

"They gave me a choice," he said, softly chuckling. "I could go in as a private and be handed a rifle, or I could 'volunteer' as a medical officer. Some choice, huh?"

Wilkerson, also in residency at Akron, got the same greeting from Uncle Sam. The two friends and colleagues mulled it over. Not that there ever was a choice. If they had to deploy, they'd do it as doctors. They volunteered for the U.S. Navy and hooked up with the Marines, first in California, then Okinawa, and finally, South Vietnam.

They ended up just north of Da Nang, with an encampment of 1,300 Marines on the coast of the South China Sea. The first nights there, when the sniper bullets whizzed the air and incoming mortar rounds made the earth quake, the two doctors were unashamedly scared out of their wits.

"Let's just say the Marines were very kind," Shahady said. "I mean, we were doctors. We didn't begin to know the first thing about being soldiers. More than one Marine told me, 'Doc, when the shooting starts, you go hide.' I did."

It was a true baptism by fire, and both doctors were having trouble functioning that first week in-country. Until a grizzled sergeant took them aside and gave them the sage advice of a veteran, Shahady said.

"He told us the only way to get by was to just say we're dead. We're dead, and there's nothing we can do about it, so we just might as well enjoy life until it really happens. It started getting easier after that."

They began to acclimate to life in the war zone, even with the shellings at night, and the chaos whenever the combat-wounded were hustled in by medics after skirmishes. Because the war was basically a nocturnal affair, the doctors often found themselves fighting a different enemy during the daytime: boredom.

"Sometimes there wasn't anything to do," he said. "Marines were healthy, until they got shot. The only thing you had to constantly treat with them were what we called the 'ee-ahs' -- gonorrhea and diarrhea."

The fledgling war, meanwhile, continued to grow, build strength and generate the one byproduct all wars are known for -- refugees. Whole villages of them, staggering down from the mountains, dazed and dying from the Viet Cong barrage.

'It just broke our hearts'

"Our colonel wanted us to take care of the Vietnamese," Shahady said. "The adults we could take to Da Nang. But the kids were a whole sad story. Parents wouldn't give food to a sick child because they knew the child was gonna die. Half the kids born in the se villages died before they were 6 months old. It just broke our hearts. A lot of them were just dehydrated, that was all."

The two doctors who cowered at shadows their first nights in Vietnam took to the countryside, rounding up infants, toddlers and young children. They came under fire more than once and Shahady once received minor shrapnel wounds.

Once back in the camp, the two did what they were trained to do. They doctored. Their hospital was a tent and 10 cots. They were outgunned and they didn't have the proper supplies, but they pushed on, with the help of Akron City Hospital.

"Trouble was, everything we had, all the antibiotics and I.V. units, were geared to adults. We didn't have any pediatric supplies. We got Akron to raise money for us."

A charity basketball game between Akron City and Akron Children's Hospital raised a few hundred dollars for the cause, Shahady said. Supplies were stocked, and the

"hospital" was gaining a reputation. Thirty more cots were added, and the facility was soon * outgrowing the tent. A structure would have to be erected, Shahady said.

The Sea Bees, that crack group of engineers who can assemble everything from a building to a bridge in an afternoon, were enlisted.

At a price, Shahady chuckled.

"I had to bribe them with medicinal brandy," he said. "I got lumber and labor in exchange for that."

Hoa Khanh Children's Hospital was official.

Gwen and WVU

Ngyen, a seamstress who spoke some English, turned out to be a wonder drug for the hospital's relations with the populace. "Gwen," as she was known by Shahady and Wilkerson, could communicate with all parties and build a bond of trust between doctors and fatalistic parents who just assumed they had pending death in the family as they dropped off their children.

"To leave their children took a lot of courage for the parents," Shahady said. "They couldn't be sure if they'd ever see them again. Gwen really kept the communication going."

The doctors treated everybody, regardless of army or nationality -- at least that's what Shahady suspects happened.

"During the day, you wouldn't know a war was on," Shahady said. "It wouldn't have surprised me if the V.C. (Viet Cong) dropped their kids off during the day and shot at us at night. But at least the kids were getting care."

Shahady and Wilkerson did their one-year hitch and headed back to Akron City in 1966. Gwen and the children of Hoa Khanh Hospital were never far from their thoughts, though, and they continued to raise money -- an incredible \$300,000 the first year home.

Gwen stayed on and the hospital continued to be staffed by West Virginians who trained in Morgantown. John Karnupakis took over from Shahady and Wilkerson, and Jim Heaster took over for him.

The hospital fell with the rest of the country after North Vietnam finally knocked through the border for good, but Gwen got out. She took several of the children with her, and ended up in San Jose, Calif., where she's now a nurse and adoptive mother of several of the now-grown adults who fled the country as kids.

"It just happened the way it was supposed to," Shahady said. "I don't know how we did it."

Shahady would eventually be awarded the U.S. Navy Commendation Medal and two South Vietnam Social Service Medals for his efforts, along with WVU's Distinguished Alumnus Award. Medals are nice, he said, but some memories are nicer.

"As you look back, you probably suppress some of the uglier things," he said. "But I just know some kids stayed alive because of us. I learned just how much power a physician has to help someone heal. Being over there absolutely defined to me what it means to be a doctor."