

# A doctor in Vietnam: hope and frustration

By MARTY WESTERMAN  
Of the Emerald

"I've been wanting to do something like this—going to an underdeveloped country to help out medically—for a long time. I was concerned about the Vietnam war; and this also gave me a chance to 'see the world'."

Dr. Glen Gordon returned to Eugene last Saturday from two months' work as one of four American consulting physicians at a civilian hospital in Da Nang, South Vietnam. He was participating in a five-year-old program called "Volunteer Physicians for Vietnam," sponsored by the U.S. Department of State and the American Medical Association.

The volunteer program was started because of the lack of Vietnamese doctors. American doctors volunteered to take care of the civilians there, and nearly the entire burden of health care in South Vietnam rested with these American physicians.

"Some of the doctors have gone back up to three times," Gordon said. "But I believe we are not adding anything anymore." He recommended in his end-of-tour report that the program be phased out because it "is not worth the effort or time" now.

Glen Gordon is a general surgeon who has practised in Eugene for the past 16 years. Originally from Texas, he attended medical school in New York City before coming out west to make his home in Oregon. A trim, tan, 46, he is pleasant and speaks with just the trace of a drawl.

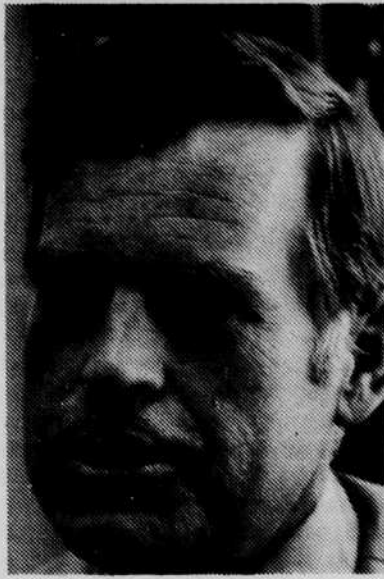
His general impression of the South Vietnamese people was

good. "There is basically nothing wrong with the people—when they are motivated they work hard as the dickens. But it is frustrating to try to pressure them when they don't want to work." He recalled trying to muster nurses who didn't feel like working at his hospital for an operation. "I was ready to give up," he said.

But generally the Americans and the Vietnamese don't like each other. Americans are snobbish on the whole, and take on an often superior attitude toward the natives. They expect the Vietnamese to learn English, because "the Americans won't learn Vietnamese," Gordon asserted. And the natives resent this. There is very little conversation between the natives and the Americans.

"Lack of a common language is an extremely important problem we have not solved," Gordon explained. It is difficult for either side to learn the other's language. For instance, Vietnamese is a language of tonal variations.

The better training and education of American physicians only makes this problem more acute. "The tendency is to dissociate from the Vietnamese rather than try to help," Gordon added.



Dr. Glen Gordon

"The Alamo" was in a compound surrounded by a fence at which Vietnamese soldiers (ARVN) stood guard. But it was not secure. One afternoon an American drove his jeep into the compound and parked it outside the barracks. He walked into the building and minutes later the jeep exploded.

The Americans there distrust the ARVN's. Gordon cited one example in which an American military compound was under Vietcong attack. The Viet Cong killed 31 American soldiers at that hamlet while an

won't make any difference. It will only put off the final decision of when to leave and how the South Vietnamese will hold up under the pressure.

"We have the capability to withdraw all Americans immediately," Gordon explained. "We should try to help those (Vietnamese) who want to leave. For what we've done to them (the South Vietnamese), we owe them something." The doctor suggested re-settling the "friendlies" and collaborators in

this country, much as we did with Cuban refugees, as those who would be most likely to emigrate are generally professional and managerial people.

"It is not unpatriotic at all to raise questions about the war—it is our right and responsibility," Gordon said. People should "keep the pressure up"—such as through support of the Eugene anti-war referendum on the upcoming ballot. "Otherwise, I don't believe the war is going to stop."

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American doctors at his hospital resorted to sign language and broken French, a more common Western language there, in order to find out where the patients "hurt."

On the other hand, those doctors who could speak with the patients, the Vietnamese doctors themselves, "are poorly trained, and they know it," Gordon said. He went on to explain that there are two medical schools in South Vietnam: one in Saigon, and another crowded into one building in Hue. The facilities at both schools are sorely limited, and at the one in Hue, doctors do not do any work until their seventh, and last year at the school. The first six years are taken up primarily by lectures.

"Helping (seventh year) interns was the best thing I could do" at the hospital, Gordon said. The facilities were minimal, Gordon went on. "Care and cleanliness were 50 to 100 years behind. There were no doors, no screens, raw sewage was just outside the building, and there were flies in the operating room." Plumbing and electricity were also poor.

Conditions were better at his barracks, however. At the "Alamo" ("I liked that name, being from Texas") not only were plumbing and electricity in good repair, but there was air conditioning. "Vietnam is a land of a million air conditioners," Gordon grinned.

adjacent ARVN compound, not under attack itself, offered the Americans no assistance. Gordon noted that this was not an isolated incident.

"The ARVN is not a fighting army," Gordon said. "It is not enthusiastic. When the moment of truth comes, I think it is going to be a paper army."

For this reason, Dr. Gordon fears for the Americans still in Vietnam. He believes that the more troops which are withdrawn, the worse it is exposing those American troops who remain to "enemy action."

"No matter how much President Nixon says, nothing is secure," the doctor asserted. The Viet Cong can drop something anywhere. Nobody travels the roads at night. Americans remain in their vehicles for safety, which "reduces the amount of conversation with the natives" even more, Gordon said.

The doctor sat back in his chair and said, "The people of South Vietnam are tired of war. The civilians have suffered the ravages of 30 years of war and act like the war is not going on." He mentioned that Vietnam has a tropical climate, and every day at noon its natives close their shops and take a two-hour "siesta." Only the Americans work through this time. "The country is not mobilized for war," Gordon added.

Gordon then surmised that continued American presence

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