

BENGE

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“Hickey and I replied that we damn well believed it,” said Bengé, who had previously served as a member of the U.S. Marines for 3-1/2 years but was then working as a civilian for the U.S. Agency for International Development.

Moments after the Tet holiday celebration started, Bengé and Hickey heard the usual crescendo of firecrackers, but above the din they also heard a huge explosion at the south end of town followed by a shock wave.

“Off to our left appeared a stream of green tracers, but these were not shot at the moon; rather they were arching toward the nearby 155th Assault Helicopter Company’s guard towers,” Bengé said.

Others began noticing that something was horribly wrong. “Oh my gosh! It’s the real thing,” Bengé heard someone shout.

The Tet Offensive, a major escalation of the Vietnam War and one of its largest military campaigns, was starting. Bengé noted the false cease fire so fooled the South Vietnamese military that it had given passes to half its soldiers so they could go home for the holiday.

“They fell for a Machiavellian ruse,” Bengé said.

Bengé worked furiously after the start of the Tet Offensive to get at least 12 USAID staff to safety. Then the North Vietnamese caught him shortly after he noticed his waving friends.

Fate in hands of ‘senseless barbarians’

Bengé was tied up and led like a dog on a leash. Two days later he arrived at Buon Ea Ana, 9 miles southwest of Ban Me Thuot. He was led to a bamboo platform where 15 teenage Montagnards were kneeling with their hands wired behind their back and their heads down. The teenagers were the defendants in a kangaroo court trial in which they were found guilty of betraying the communist revolution. The judge then killed each of the young men by shooting him in the base of his skull.

“I wondered if the NVA (North Vietnamese Army) had orchestrated it at that time to impress me; and impressed I was by how cruel, inhumane and without conscience the Vietnamese Communists were. My fate was now in the hands of numerous, senseless barbarians,” Bengé said.

Barbarians who would treat Bengé with unspeakable cruelty. On a number of occasions he was sure that he would be killed.

Once, early in the days of his captivity, one of his captors accused him of lying. The man then jerked his hand, jamming the pistol into Bengé’s temple.

“I thought I had bought the farm. Everything went as if I was in a cloud, and it took me a few seconds to realize I wasn’t dead and regain my composure,” said Bengé, who grew up on a ranch between Heppner and Ione and today lives in Falls Church, Virginia.

The North Vietnamese were constantly asking Bengé for information. He eventually determined his best chance of survival was to provide small amounts of information that were basically meaningless.

“The North Vietnamese were not that interested in



Bengé

information, (the threats) were mostly a power trip. If you confessed to something, you could make do, but if

you resisted too long or too hard you would be badly tortured, or just killed,” Bengé said.

In the first months after his capture, Bengé was placed in a small pole cage with a grass roof where his legs and arms were tied in stocks. He would be taken out of the stocks once a day to eat and use a latrine.

“This became an everyday routine,” he said.

Determined to survive

Bengé was at a large camp that held about 50 Vietnamese and Montagnard prisoners. He was later joined by two American missionaries, Betty Olsen, a nurse from a hospital where people were treated for leprosy, and Hank Blood, a Wycliffe Bible translator. Bengé, Olsen and Blood were kept together and moved to a different location once a month. In July 1968 they were moved to a mountain camp.

“All three were chained to a tree with little cover during a cold two-day rainstorm while our keepers stayed in a nearby cave,” Bengé said.

A North Vietnamese nurse diagnosed Blood with pneumonia. Medics at the site refused to treat him, saying their medicine was for their soldiers. Blood soon died.

Bengé said Olsen’s health also was deteriorating.

“She told our guards that unless she had some nutritious food she would die,” Bengé said.

The guards initially refused Olsen’s request and threatened to kill her if she continued to ask for more food. Then they appeared to back down and provided a large meal. One which had tragic consequences.

Bengé and Olsen were given a meal of rice, corn, mung beans and bamboo shoots.

“We were so hungry we gobbled everything down,” Bengé said.

The two soon became extremely ill because the bamboo shoots had not been boiled twice. This caused them to get dysentery.

“The North Vietnamese had determined that it was to be our Last Supper,” Bengé said.

The pair became violently ill. Olsen died about two days later.

“I was a bit stronger,” Bengé said, “and I had made up my mind not to give them the satisfaction of dying.”

Bengé succeeded but only after being extremely weakened.

“I struggled for the next two weeks, barely able to put one foot in front of another,” he said.

His reward for surviving

was more horrific adversity. Bengé was transported to a camp in the Rattanakiri Province in Cambodia. There he was held with 13 U.S. Army troops in cages for a year before being moved to Hanoi in North Vietnam, which today is the capital city of reunified Vietnam.

Bengé would be held captive in Hanoi for five more years.

The worst part of the experience were the total of 17 months he spent in solitary confinement, including one year in a black box in Hanoi. Bengé said he survived the solitary confinement by keeping his mind active.

“I built a house in my mind,” he said. “It was important to keep my mind focused in a positive way.”

He was released as a POW in 1973.

“I can’t explain what it felt like to finally be free,” Bengé said.

Returning to home, family and new career

Terry Hughes of Island City, a nephew of Bengé’s, was attending an Oregon State University basketball game in Corvallis when he was paged for a phone call. On the line was his mother who greeted Hughes with two words — “He’s alive!” she told her son.

Hughes will never forget the sense of joy and relief that two-word message conveyed.

“I still get emotional when I talk about it 47 years later,” he said.

Hughes said his family received reports from the State Department and the Red Cross that people had spotted his uncle in North Vietnam.

“Once a year we would get a report that someone had seen him,” Hughes said.

He said when Bengé first returned to his home in Oregon he slept on the floor. Hughes said Bengé had become accustomed to sleeping on hard beds while a POW.

Bengé was recognized after his release by the U.S. State Department for his efforts to help people evacuate from Ban Me Thout. He said he was presented with its highest honor for heroism, crediting him with saving the lives of 12 people.

Bengé, who has a degree in agriculture from Oregon State University and a master’s degree in agroforestry from the University of the Philippines, enjoyed a successful and award-winning career as a horticulturist after leaving Vietnam. Today he is a member of Vietnam Veterans for Factual History. The group publishes works its members write about the Vietnam War.

“We just want to get the truth out,” Bengé said.

He has written at least 300 papers and book chapters about Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. Bengé is now at work on his mem-

oirs, including a portion on his Vietnam experiences.

“I’m about three-fourths of the way through,” said Bengé, who said he is enjoying the process.

Recollecting the horrors of his Vietnam experiences does not upset him.

“I have never really suffered from post-traumatic stress syndrome,” the former POW said.

Hughes described his uncle as an amazing person who can speak the dialects of multiple Southeast Asian languages. The trauma Bengé suffered through in Southeast Asia five decades ago has never dimmed his passion for its people and culture.

“He truly loves the people of Southeast Asia,” Hughes said.

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Subcontractors, Suppliers & Local Businesses are invited to Union School District’s Bond Projects

OPEN HOUSE

Wednesday, November 11 @ 10:00 AM

All interested contractors, suppliers and businesses are invited to an open house to learn more about the upcoming Union School District Bond Project, including scope introductions and upcoming bid opportunities.

A non-mandatory open house will be held on **Wednesday, November 11, at 10:00 AM** at the **Union School District High School Gymnasium**, located at 540 South Main Street, Union, Oregon 97883.

MASKS AND SOCIAL DISTANCING WILL BE REQUIRED.
shawnt@kirbynagelhout.com
Phone: (541) 389-7119

District-Wide Upgrade Scope Includes:

<p>High School:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Interior & exterior upgrades ▪ New elevator tower ▪ Interior office/entry remodel ▪ Safety & security upgrades ▪ Exterior envelope enhancements <p>High School Gymnasium:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Construction of entry addition ▪ Safety & security upgrades ▪ Exterior envelope enhancements 	<p>Miller Elementary School:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Interior office/entry remodel ▪ Safety & security upgrades ▪ Exterior envelope renovation & upgrades ▪ New parking lot & drop-off area <p>Hutchinson Elementary School:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Safety & security upgrades ▪ Exterior envelope enhancements ▪ Window replacement
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Mechanical, Electrical, Plumbing and Site improvements throughout the campus including various modernizations & upgrades.

KNCC is an equal opportunity employer and encourages all interested firms including tribal, women, disadvantaged, minority, disabled veterans, and emerging small businesses to attend.

All subcontractors, businesses, and vendors are invited to learn more about the upcoming opportunities for Union School District’s Bond Projects. Stay tuned for upcoming bidding opportunities. If you wish to learn more, please submit a request to Shawn Towne via email at ShawnT@KirbyNagelhout.com or phone 541-389-7119.

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