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GUEST OPINION: Letter from Vietnam, 1965: 'We won't be here long'

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Forty-five years ago, on March 8, 1965, the first U.S. combat troops landed at Danang, Vietnam. Young women carrying flowers waded into the surf to greet the Marines. The next 10 years would be less hospitable.

By now, thousands of books have examined our country's intentions and missteps during the longest military engagement and only defeat in our history. But there is another, little-known story of America's war in Vietnam — the civilians who served there before and after the soldiers came.

Many don't know that in the late 1950s and early '60s, hundreds of American civilians were living and working in Vietnam's hamlets and villages. They included intelligence operatives, such as Graham Greene's fictional Alden Pyle (based on a real person) in "The Quiet American," along with plows-and-fertilizer specialists from the U.S. Agency for International Development. Dozens of faith-based, agriculture, family services and medical organizations also fielded staff and volunteers there. All were part of a massive civilian aid effort.

One of these civilians was my brother, Pete Hunting.

He arrived in Saigon in July 1963, a newly minted graduate of Wesleyan University. Years later, his fraternity brothers would recall Pete's excitement on the Frisbee field as he anticipated his great adventure. That spring he wrote home, "I'm as restless as an octopus in a pan of hot water."

As a volunteer with the Peace Corps prototype International Voluntary Services (IVS), he thought he would be teaching English. Instead, he was put to work digging wells, pouring cement and laying brick. He was four months into the job when President Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu were murdered during a coup d'etat. That same month, President John F. Kennedy was assassinated.

Pete's letters home chronicled the evolution of U.S. foreign policy on the ground, the shifting attitudes of Vietnamese and photo-op visits to Ninh Thuan, where he lived, by Kennedy Cabinet secretaries Robert McNamara and Dean Rusk ("a tired,



U.S. Operations Mission, Jill Hunting's collection

Pete Hunting adjusts the mechanism of a windmill he designed and built in Ninh Thuan province, Vietnam, circa 1964.

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overweight, gullible old man”).

He worked in remote hamlets, mostly isolated from his IVS teammates and at times unaware of what was happening just a province or two away. “Nothing much is new,” he wrote the day of the Marine landing at Danang. “All is very peaceful and serene here.” In the same letter he speculated that IVSers and perhaps all U.S. citizens would be coming home soon. “Unless (President) Johnson brings in American combat troops for the big battles,” he said, “I don't think we'll be here very long.” The war would last a decade.

Now we are engaged in what may be a protracted war in Afghanistan. As President Barack Obama's July 2011 date to start bringing home our troops approaches, and until then, I suggest we ask some questions. How will we define victory? Or defeat? What turn-back points have been identified? We missed too many in Vietnam when the answers were blowin' in the wind. Today, we have too much at stake to ignore them.

My brother did not live to see the outcome of the Vietnam War and became one of its first civilian casualties. At the wheel of his jeep on Nov. 12, 1965, he died in what the New York Times reported as a brutal ambush. That evening on the CBS evening news, Walter Cronkite announced that Pete, identified as a 24-year-old American civilian aid worker, had been “led to his death by two Vietnamese, apparently Vietcong agents, who had posed as his friends.” So somber was Cronkite's delivery it seemed to prophesy the terrible course that lay ahead.

I had just turned 15 when word of Pete's death came to my family in an early-morning call from IVS headquarters in Washington. I answered the phone and summoned my father after a stranger asked to speak with him. The news plunged us into shock, along with the media spotlight, as headlines and news accounts blared that my brother had been murdered. Ironically, though the world knew our story, at home it was off limits.

Grief overwhelmed my mother. She took possession of Pete's memory and his letters, which she told me were destroyed in a basement flood. It took me 40 years to piece together what had really happened to him. As I did, I wondered half-seriously if, as the great-great-granddaughter of the founder of Skull and Bones, I had grown up in a family unusually good at keeping secrets.

How I eventually stepped outside the bounds of our silence and found Pete's letters, and where they took me and how they changed me, is a story too long for here. But as what I discovered became a book, not only did I find Pete, I found Jill.

According to author and poet John Balaban, another IVS volunteer, 8,744,000 Americans went to Vietnam. As we reflect on the anniversary of our military introduction there, many of us will think of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.

Many will think also of the American and Vietnamese noncombatants who lost their lives. To overlook them is to deny the true toll of war on the human family.

In the polished granite of the sacred Wall in our nation's capital we see our own reflection along with the names of more than 58,000 who died in Vietnam. Now can we go the next step and remember the others?

Jill Hunting of Sonoma is the author of “Finding Pete: Rediscovering the Brother I Lost in Vietnam” and founder of the campaign to build “The Book of Remembrance,” a sculpture to honor civilians killed in wars, for the new headquarters of the United States Institute of Peace, in Washington, D.C. Her Web site is www.jillhunting.com. She will speak at 7 p.m. April 13 at Copperfield's Books in Sebastopol.

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