

# The Washington Post

## A Lost Brother's Lost Words

Four decades after her brother's death in Vietnam, a woman rediscovers his missing letters -- and comes to terms with the mother who hid them away

By Jill Hunting  
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"WE HAVE A BIG SURPRISE FOR YOU," MY SISTER CAROL TOLD ME, unlocking the door of my mother's house. Mom had had a stroke and was in a nursing home. My sisters and I needed to decide what to do with her possessions before renting her house. It wouldn't be easy. She was a saver, a Connecticut Yankee who hung on to things, even grocery lists and rough drafts of thank-you notes.

Carol led me into the house, which was empty except for rented tables onto which my sisters had placed the accumulation of our parents' 50-year marriage, including travel souvenirs, knickknacks, heirlooms and even some wedding presents in their original wrapping. I took in the piles of piano music, musty hardcover books and paintings leaning against walls.

"You'll never believe what we found," my sister Holly said as we walked into the living room. In the far corner sat my old, blue camp footlocker. "It was locked, but we found the key," Carol said. I knelt and raised the lid to behold a jumble of papers in utter disorder. Then I saw them: my brother's long-lost letters from Vietnam.

From the time he'd gone away to summer camp, my brother, Pete, had always been a good letter writer. When he went to Vietnam in 1963 to help build schools and teach English for an organization called International Voluntary Services, he kept in touch by sending us wonderfully descriptive, often humorous letters. Early in my adolescence, the names he mentioned -- Diem, McNamara, Lodge and Rusk -- didn't mean much to me. As an adult, I'd longed to reread every word he'd written. Only one thing -- or rather, one person -- stood between me and my desire to better understand who my brother was and what had happened to him. That person was my mother.

After Pete was killed in a 1965 ambush that was reported in The Washington Post and the New York Times, a curtain of silence descended in our home. Barely 15, I quickly learned that to talk about him could set off my mother's tidal-force grief. Before, she had been a model of decorum, but with Pete's death she wept at the mention of his name. Behind her tears and sadness lurked a fury I didn't understand.

MOTHER SAID THE LETTERS HAD BEEN DESTROYED IN A BASEMENT FLOOD. That's what she told me when I asked to reread them a few years after I'd graduated from college. By then, it had been more than a decade since Pete's death, and she no longer broke down at the mention of him.

My brother had gone to Southeast Asia directly from Wesleyan University, where he'd majored in

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government. Never much of a student, he had nonetheless discovered an aptitude for languages, studying French and excelling in Chinese. Close to his graduation in 1963, he'd signed up with a little-known organization called International Voluntary Services (IVS), which was recruiting agriculture and education volunteers for Vietnam. A forerunner of the Peace Corps, IVS was a nonprofit organization founded in 1953 "to combat hunger, poverty, disease and illiteracy in the underdeveloped

areas of the world, and thereby further the peace, happiness and prosperity of the people." Pete was assigned to the education team and was sent to Phan Rang, a coastal city between Nha Trang and Saigon, just before the government of President Ngo Dinh Diem was overthrown and John F. Kennedy was assassinated.

When the trunk filled with his letters was shipped to my house in Northern California, I recognized Pete's elongated, slender handwriting -- very much like mine -- on letters and thin, blue aerograms. Photographs of smiling Vietnamese and cactus- and eucalyptus-studded landscapes peeked from envelopes that still bore their stamps from the now-nonexistent Republic of Vietnam.

Sympathy letters were stuffed into several brown paper bags. There were spools of audiotape and reels of 8mm film that Pete had sent back to the States. Along with his journal, photo albums, handmade Chinese-language flash cards, road maps and other windows into his world were 74 letters he'd mailed us from Vietnam.

I resisted the urge to riffle through the letters immediately. I wanted to read them in chronological order, and, more important, they were fragile. To avoid overhandling the aged originals, I photocopied them first, along with his diary. Then I finally sat down to read my brother's words almost 40 years after he'd written them.

On June 20, 1963, he'd written in his journal, "Kiss the sisses goodbye" after he left Connecticut for his IVS orientation in Washington. Two weeks later, he was in My Tho, Vietnam, for language training and was at the top of his class. The playfulness I remembered so well appeared early in Pete's correspondence: "Kids swarm all around you. I told one that I had a cat in my pocket. At first he couldn't believe I was speaking Vietnamese. He thought I was speaking English that sounded an awful lot like the Vietnamese equivalent of 'I have a cat in my pocket.' Then I pulled out this little cat puppet . . . Well, the kid went wild."

A month later, Pete was barhopping in Saigon with an IVS teammate and learning about conditions so primitive in some Montagnard hamlets that even the relief organization CARE wouldn't enter. There were run-ins with a self-important Maj. Cook and complaints about his IVS housemate, an agriculture graduate from Tennessee whose specialties were chickens, pigs, and their attendant parasites and diseases. "They take a lethal-looking hypodermic and ram it in" the swine's tail end, he observed. "Needless to say, the pig will have a very self-conscious look about him after undergoing treatment."

Phan Rang, his home base, reminded him of the landscape of Oklahoma, where we'd moved during Pete's college years: "flat, dry, sandy, hot and scrubby looking." He liked riding on the tailgate of a Land Rover for the breeze and the view. He didn't say he was homesick, but he missed American desserts. "How do you make a pie crust, and what's the basic formula for making the filling using berries or fruits, or lemon meringue?" he asked. "All we have for dessert over here is fruit, fruit, fruit."

In November 1963, Pete bought a radio. One afternoon, he was listening to music and wrapping Christmas presents when suddenly the music stopped. Two IVSers walked in with news of a coup d'etat in Saigon. President Diem and his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu had been captured (and soon would be executed). Suddenly,

machine guns were mounted on the local Army compound, and an American captain stopped by to recommend staying indoors and avoiding crowds. Later that month, while writing about his dengue fever, Pete interrupted himself. "My God. Just heard over the radio about President Kennedy's assassination . . . It makes me feel sick, as though it had been somebody in my own family."

By the end of 1963, Pete was mimeographing health pamphlets for hamlet science teachers, building smokehouses to dehydrate and preserve fish, and constructing rabbit cages so that villagers could raise and sell the animals to fund a schoolteacher's salary.

As 1964 began and "Hello, Dolly!" opened on Broadway, Pete wrote that the Viet Cong were distributing rat poison among villagers to kill Americans, and that he had acquired two nicknames, Mr. Tall American and Mr. Big Nose. His interpreter had overheard a group of old ladies talking about him. They wondered how Americans with such big noses managed to make love. When he arrived in a hamlet for the first time, the kids would "come out running and screaming; and then they take a second look and exclaim something to the effect, 'Hey, it's Mr. Big Nose.'"

He complained about the "supercilious" U.S. bureaucrats who were often dismissive of his projects. "They sit behind their desks and say, 'No, it'll never work.' I wish someone would pay me \$8,000 a year for that." Later, he met some of the architects of U.S. policy in Vietnam. "Dean Rusk, Cabot Lodge, and Premier Khanh dropped in for some pep talks the other day," he wrote. "Quite a snow job on Rusk. He sure must be a tired, overweight, gullible old man."

The violence in Vietnam was getting worse. Pete made numerous references to Viet Cong killed nearby and his own close calls, but I couldn't believe how nonchalant he had seemed about his personal safety. In August of 1964, he wrote, "I was almost material for VC celebration the other day. Two men came to the house asking me to take a windmill out to their hamlet the following day. I'd heard there were VC in the province so I checked with MAC-V that evening and was warned to stay clear of that particular area. The next morning a reconnaissance plane spotted VC in the rocks along the road I would've taken. Phew."

Eight months later, after U.S. ground troops had arrived, there was fighting nearby at Pleiku, Qui Nhon and Danang. Pete hadn't heard about it and went out to see a hamlet teacher. The teacher looked shocked to see him. "My God," he exclaimed, "what are you doing out here?" Pete quickly returned to the safety of Phan Rang. "Then I went out to see yet another teacher," he continued, "but I never made it because the VC threw an ambush, and I got shot full of holes, and they killed me. Nope, just kidding."

In only one letter did Pete speak seriously and directly about his safety. On Aug. 25, 1964, he wrote to me: "You don't need to worry about my security over here. It sounds much worse in American newspapers than it is in my province. Our province here is quite peaceful, and the people are very friendly, even though we can see guerilla croplands on the mountain-sides at the end of our airstrip."

As the war escalated around him, he told funny stories about his IVS duties, including an assignment to distribute 850 garments sent to Vietnam by CARE. "We found an old castaway girdle that must have come from some mastodon of a DAR Old Guardian Society whip. Had a lot of fun with the hamlet chief joking about possible uses for the contraption." The chief finally decided to sew up the bottom and use it for a bag when he went to market.

While Pete's correspondence told me much I hadn't known, it also reminded me of my brother's droll sense of humor, intelligence and buoyancy. During the two days I read his letters, he felt alive to me again. I was

most of the way through the stack when it suddenly hit me that the pile was getting smaller, and I was coming to the end. I sobbed at the realization that Pete would soon be dead.

**I SAW MY BROTHER FOR WHAT WOULD BE THE LAST TIME** when he came home from Vietnam on a two-month leave in May 1965. I remember his homecoming clearly. I was returning from school and saw him step outside onto the front porch. I dropped my armload of books on the grass so I could run to him and hug him with both arms. My father recorded the moment with an 8mm camera. A few frames later, Pete and I are standing side by side, his arm is around me, and he is looking down into my eyes, smiling.

Pete was an affectionate brother without being soppy. I loved just hanging out with him, and even with the nine-year age difference between us, I can't recall a single time that he told me to get lost. I can still see him as a teenager diligently tinkering with his red motor scooter, the greasy parts lying in pieces on the carport floor, while I looked on. Finally, when he got the old Cushman running, we took it out for a spin. I remember how I clung to his waist and the wind blew my hair as we sped down the hill by our house.

He turned 24 while he was back from Vietnam. I gave him a birthday card and wrote inside: "You really are a cool brother. It's been great having you home. I wish you weren't going back."

**HOLLY AND I WERE IN THE BATHROOM PUTTING ON OUR MAKEUP** and fixing our hair when the phone rang around 7 a.m. on November 12, 1965. We were dressed in our Pep Club uniforms for a football game that night. (Carol was married and living out of state.) The only telephone in our house was in the hallway outside the bathroom. My father came out of his bedroom to take the call and must have signaled for us to go into my room. From a few feet away, behind the closed door, we stood listening to the grave tone of his voice. He spoke so quietly, we couldn't hear what he was saying. He hung up the phone and returned in silence to his bedroom. Holly and I could tell that someone had died. But who? My grandmother? Carol? It didn't occur to me that it was Pete. Then we heard a terrifying, high-pitched shriek coming from the bedroom. It was my mother.

We waited for what seemed like a long time before Dad returned. He quietly told us that Pete had been killed in a land mine explosion. I had never heard of a land mine, but I understood it was some kind of a bomb, and Pete had driven over it. I don't remember what happened next, but I do know that there wasn't a moment when the four of us came together to share our shock and grief.

Instead, a stream of my parents' friends began to arrive at the house. There were phone calls to and from our relatives, many in Connecticut and a few in New York, Illinois and Indiana. Casseroles and desserts appeared and were set out on a large table at the end of the living room. I looked at the food but didn't feel hungry. Some of it went into a freezer in the garage. A pineapple upside-down cake wrapped loosely in foil remained there for months, maybe years.

Someone turned on the radio, and we heard a man announce our personal tragedy to the world. Driving in the Mekong Delta, the voice said, Peter Morse Hunting, a 24-year-old civilian with International Voluntary Services, had been killed when his vehicle hit a land mine. "Thank God he died instantly," someone said. Within an hour or two, the report was corrected to say that Pete had been shot five times in the head. Another 10 rounds had been fired into his body. I found it impossible to take in the brutality of his death.

My parents maintained their composure as people came and went. Neighbors and friends stood in the kitchen or sat in the living room. At one point, to avoid their stares, I lay my head in Holly's lap and cried. My parents did not try to comfort us. Holly and I were on our own to figure out how to behave or to fill the

long hours of that day, and I suppose my parents were, too.

It was many years later that I learned how widely Pete's death had been reported. In 1965, U.S. casualties in Vietnam were just beginning to mount, and the murder of a noncombatant who, as The Post reported, "had spent more than two years helping Vietnamese civilians," seemed particularly shocking. My great-aunt and great-uncle learned the news from Walter Cronkite. "In the Mekong Delta, a 24-year-old American civilian aid worker, Peter Hunting of Oklahoma City, was killed in a guerrilla ambush today," Cronkite somberly told viewers of the "CBS Evening News." "Officials said that Hunting was led to his death by two Vietnamese, apparently Viet Cong agents, who had posed as his friends."

I wondered, Why would anyone betray him?

We flew to Connecticut for services and stayed at my mother's family farm near New Haven. Pete's remains were flown to Hartford. Years later, I would learn from my uncle that my mother had insisted on being the one to identify Pete's bullet-riddled body. "She wouldn't let any of us go with her, not even your father," he said.

There was a memorial service for Pete in Saigon at the International Protestant Church, where Vietnamese friends sang folk songs Pete had learned to play on his guitar and the IVS director for Vietnam, Don Luce, eulogized him as someone who "came to help and felt deeply the problems of the Vietnamese people."

Months later, Vice President Hubert Humphrey returned from a trip to South Vietnam with a medal awarded posthumously to Pete by the Vietnamese government. Humphrey invited our family to Washington and presented the silver medal to my parents at his office at the Capitol. His eyes brimmed with tears when he described Pete as a man who "represented the best that this country has to offer."

At his funeral at the Woodbridge, Conn., Congregational church, Pete was remembered -- in the town where he had spent his youth and that had been his second home during college -- for his vision, "freedom from vanity and self-importance" and "the example of his love, courage and work." Because I have a copy of the service, I know what was said, but I remember nothing about it except arriving at the church under weeping skies and seeing a lot of people I didn't recognize. Afterward, at the cemetery, we placed wildflowers from the farm on his coffin.

WITHIN WEEKS OF THE SERVICES IN CONNECTICUT, Mother took possession of everything related to Pete, including his letters, personal effects and even our right to mourn, as if her grief were more important and more profound than ours. She'd always tended toward a certain emotional intensity and was, as Dad would say, given to hyperbole. It wasn't enough for her to describe her father as an honest businessman; he was "the only man in New Haven who could get a bank loan during the Depression." She didn't love her country, she "passionately adored" it. "Always," "never," "ever" and "only" were among her prime vocabulary words. More reserved by nature, I had regarded her somewhat warily for as long as I could remember. With my brother's death, the distance between us only increased.

She lost her temper more easily than before, and my father, Holly and I kept out of her way to avoid setting her off. We tiptoed, figuratively and literally, around the house. She couldn't sleep at night, and her nerves were so badly frayed that my father muted the ring of the telephone by inserting a piece of foam where the hammer struck the bell.

One time, she misplaced her pen and accused my father and me of taking it in an attempt to make her think

she was crazy. I remember looking at my father helplessly. In truth, she was a little crazy. She was in tears many times during my remaining 2 1/2 years of high school. Her mind was often elsewhere. Once, it was my turn to provide a ride home after rehearsal for the school musical. My friends and I waited a long time for Mom before I called to see if she was on her way. She said she was coming. More time passed, and my friends grew impatient. When I called again, she said she had gotten up from a nap with my first call, but she'd forgotten what she was doing and, instead of getting dressed, had gone back to bed.

My father's grief was far less obvious. The two of us were in the car one evening when he was pulled over for speeding. As he handed his driver's license to the policeman, he said simply: "I'm sorry, officer. I didn't have my mind on my driving. I've just lost my son in Vietnam." The policeman was kind and sent us on our way.

I didn't probe my own sadness for several years. And though I might have benefited from more intimacy with my mother, what I wanted was more distance. College in Massachusetts provided a way out of the tensions at home, but the strain between my mother and me only increased when I took part in antiwar demonstrations. I blamed our military involvement for my brother's death more than I did the people who had actually killed him. Only once did I tell my parents I felt that our leaders were wrong. When I did, my mother rebuked me with the words, "You are betraying your brother's memory!"

I'll never know whether she flat-out lied in saying Pete's letters had been destroyed. Maybe she'd convinced herself that they had been. Or maybe she simply couldn't bear to open the trunk. I was still years away from being mature enough and forgiving enough to talk with her about Pete. By that time, it was too late. My father had died in 1997. Dementia had robbed my mother of most of her memories. Yet it had also softened the parts of her personality that I'd found unlikable. She couldn't tell me about Pete, but she could admire the beauty of the cardinals and the trees outside her nursing home, often exclaiming how tall the loblolly pines were, as if seeing them anew each time.

I'D BEEN TO VIETNAM ONCE, BEFORE FINDING PETE'S LETTERS. In 1991, I'd traveled there with a group led by Don Luce. I went expecting to see Pete's windmills and a library built in his memory. But Americans were rare in rural Vietnam before our countries renewed diplomatic ties, and when a few of us stopped in a hamlet to inquire about an IVSer's former cook, the authorities didn't like it. We were escorted out of the province and prohibited from seeing where Pete had lived or worked.

Now that I'd read Pete's letters, I was eager to return. On a hot morning this past September, I again headed south on Highway 1 in Ninh Thuan province. In this most arid region of Vietnam, the landscape is a broad plain with a backdrop of low, craggy mountains. There are occasional modest vineyards.

The country had changed dramatically since my last visit. The United States had an embassy in Hanoi, Vietnam was transitioning to a market economy, and tourists traveled far more freely. But to my disappointment, I could find no evidence of Pete's life in Phan Rang, neither his windmills nor the library. I asked our interpreter to stop in a Cham village known for its weavers. Pete had written about a woman whose blankets he'd helped sell, and I wondered if this might be her home. She'd offered Pete her marriageable daughter and urged him to have his horoscope and palm read -- "the equivalent of our blood test," he'd joked. "Think I'll take a vacation soon."

As we entered the village, our interpreter arbitrarily selected a house where, inside, we could see brightly colored weavings hanging on the wall. Two young women who were sisters began unfolding beautiful, intricately designed spreads. After I purchased several weavings, a third sister arrived. I told her that my

brother had come here 40 years ago and helped a woman sell her blankets. She replied that her parents had a good American friend "before the soldiers came." She said her mother had told her he spoke their language. I knew Pete spoke Cham, and my antennae went up.

The young woman said her mother described the American as tall, with a "high" nose. Her father would call out, "Here come blue eyes!" when they saw him approaching on his motorcycle. It was Pete. He'd been so proud of the Honda he bought in 1964.

The young woman said that one day he told her grandmother to pack as many weavings as she could into her largest basket. They rode to the Po Klong Garai towers, which I'd visited the day before, and she sold everything in her basket. She warned Pete that it was dangerous for him to come to the village. "Don't worry about me," he'd told her, just as he'd written to me.

Then he went away and never came back, the young woman said. Hearing the question in her voice, I told her Pete had moved to the Mekong Delta and been killed. She raised her hand to cover her open mouth.

Her mother lived too far away for us to go see her that day, so I went to the car and pulled Pete's picture out of my suitcase. When I handed it to the young woman, she looked at my brother's face and back to mine. "This is for your mother," I said. "Please tell her Pete's sister came back."

*Jill Hunting is California-based writer who is working on a book called Finding Pete, Rediscovering the Brother I Lost in Vietnam. Her e-mail is [info@jillhunting.com](mailto:info@jillhunting.com).*

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