

HANOI 1972

an excerpt from Chapter 5 of Maverick Priest (in manuscript)

By Fr. Harry Bury, as told to Carol Masters

Women Against Military Madness Newsletter presents the second of two pieces (the first was “Audrey Kvist and the Vietnam War,” Winter 2014) in solidarity with the Full Disclosure campaign, a Veterans For Peace effort to speak the truth and keep alive the antiwar perspective on the 50th anniversary of the U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. The goal is to represent a clear alternative to the Pentagon's current efforts to sanitize and mythologize the Vietnam War and its attempts to legitimize further unnecessary and destructive wars. The following segment reveals peace activists, who worked to end the war, witnessing the truth about the bombing of civilian facilities and homes while President Nixon told the American public that the U.S. was bombing only military targets.



Carol Masters with Marianne Hamilton (right).

In September, 1972, Catholics in Hanoi invited me and Marianne Hamilton, a peace activist from Minneapolis and [later] one of the founders of WAMM (Women Against Military Madness), to come to Hanoi. ...Marianne had been with our group during the 1970 Paris Peace talks. She spoke French, an asset in Vietnam, and she knew some of the Vietnamese diplomats from Paris and other peace conferences.

Our hosts wanted us to train North Vietnamese delegates to a peace conference in Quebec, to show them how to relate to the Western press. Marianne and I were organizers of this International Conference of Christians in Solidarity with the Vietnamese, Laotian and Cambodian People. We hoped that the presence of North Vietnamese on the continent would influence the U.S. electorate to vote for Senator George McGovern rather than give President Richard Nixon a second term.

Marianne and I were to be a part of a larger delegation of peace activists. Our mission was to bring back to the United States three prisoners of war, Lieutenant Markham Gartley, Lieutenant Norris Charles, and Major Charles Elias. The three pilots had been shot down in an area controlled by the Pathet Lao and were to be released as a gesture of reconciliation. The Vietnamese preferred to release these pilots—not to an official government body but to peace workers: William Sloane Coffin, Richard Falk, David Dellinger, and Cora Weiss, along with Marianne and myself.*

None of us was naïve, I believe, in undertaking this journey, or expecting to be lauded for returning three captured pilots. What I knew about North-South politics I learned, not from U.S. newspapers, but from earlier trips and from talking with the Vietnamese. My experiences with fellow priests and Catholics in Saigon led me to trust them. My witness to the Vietnamese people's suffering convinced me that we needed to do this trip. If we were used as propaganda, so be it; our trip was in the service of peace...

Nam Dinh

When we met for dinner, Marianne was wearing a traditional ao dai [a tight-fitting silk tunic worn over pants] made by hand and in one day [by a local seamstress our hosts recommended]. Everyone oohed and aahed. "Now I feel like I fit in," she laughed. "I feel like dancing!" She twirled around the floor. The hotel kitchen staff came out and applauded. Marianne bowed and curtsied, to everyone's delight.

Our trip to the provinces was haunting—it took four hours to go ninety kilometers, the road a mass of stones from filled-in bomb craters. Our jeep driver, an expert at vehicular improvisation, skirted innumerable unfilled holes, threw the clutch to grind through others. Wedged between myself and Mr. Tri, Marianne stayed in place by hanging on to a metal bar in front of us, while we gripped the doors and I prayed they would not spring open. Our passage was lit only by the autumn moon. ...

In the city of Nam Dinh, the North's second largest city after Hanoi (120,000 souls) and provincial capital, destruction was everywhere. We toured by jeep and on foot, down streets of dwellings charred and broken, almost a ghost town. Our steps slowed as we looked in horror. From time to time, people came to doorways to watch us. Children ran up to us and then stood back and stared. Marianne walked up to one doorway where several women stood and extended her hands and asked: "Ma mère, mon amie, que puis-je dire?" (My mother, friend, what can I say to you?)

An older woman took her hand, smiled and stepped aside, bowed in a gesture to bid us enter. Hospitality even here, despite the suffering our fellow Americans caused. Our guide, however, said no, as we had much to do. Marianne thanked the ladies, for more than they knew. I walked away from them reluctantly.

At the hospital, we picked our way through ruins, looked out of broken windows across the courtyard... "this was the pediatric ward" ...broken corridors, gaping roof. Seventy percent of the town was in ruins, including the hospital. "Don't you mark hospitals with red crosses on roofs?" Marianne asked naively. "Not any more," our guide answered.

All of the churches and parochial schools were severely damaged; many children were killed. In this city, small buildings housed textile workers (80 percent were women); of these and other homes, 60 to 70 percent were bombed. The scene gave the lie, I thought, to Nixon's claim of a military target policy. The few citizens trying to scratch out an existence among the ruins watched us curiously as we walked about. When we tried to include them in a picture, though, they scurried away.

* William Sloane Coffin, the original inspiration for Gary Trudeau's Rev. Scott Sloan in the Doonesbury comic strip, was already an icon for spiritual progressives. His mission to free the pilots was controversial, publicized in North Vietnam as a peace initiative and in the U.S. as Communist propaganda. Richard Falk was a writer. Cora Weiss, a well-known peace advocate and director of the Committee of Liaison with Families of Prisoners Detained in Vietnam, assembled our group. Along with David Dellinger, she had been organizing mail exchanges between families and prisoners.

Father Bury served in Catholic parishes in the Twin Cities, including at the Newman Center across the street from the University of Minnesota ROTC building, where he did draft counseling during the Vietnam War and was moved to further involvement in peace activities. Over the years he has visited and taught in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Thailand. Carol Masters is a writer, editor, antiwar activist and member of the WAMM Newsletter Committee.