

PM: Audrey Kvist and the Vietnam War

As told to Polly Mann

As we approach the 50th anniversary of the U.S. war on Vietnam, it's a good time to hear Audrey Kvist's story. It is a life-changing and personal experience when an individual realizes he or she no longer believes in the use of war and violence. Audrey Kvist was willing to share with me her story of that experience. Audrey grew up as one of the 13 children of the Wisconsin Vander Loops, conscientious Roman Catholics all, but it was through her direct experience in Viet Nam during the U.S. war in that country that she came to eventually believe that war and violence are futile.

Audrey was a registered nurse, as well as a nun, who heeded the call of the Catholic Relief Services (CRS) to work in a nutrition program for Vietnamese mothers. She arrived in Viet Nam on New Year's Day of 1970. The USAID (U.S. Aid for International Development) had authorized a nutrition program under Public Law 480. That CRS program was headed by Darlene Ramage, a nutritionist, and Audrey. They hired five young Vietnamese women who had degrees from U.S. universities but needed logistical support from CRS and the U.S. military in order to accomplish their work. The Vietnamese women, in turn, supervised young women with high school educations who taught nutrition and health classes to mothers in the villages. These classes were conducted in small villages with programs based in the larger South Vietnamese cities of Nha Trang and Da Nang.



In the rice paddies.



With Vietnamese children in the small village of Song Pha, near the highlands of Na Trang is an Irish nun, Sister Pat Carroll. She knew her way around and helped Audrey with her work.



Young Vietnamese teachers who worked in the villages.

As a reward for attending classes, participants were given the PL-480 foods. Systems were disrupted during the war and the Vietnamese people were in need. The foods the program provided were powdered milk, cooking oil, bulgur wheat, and other foods—agricultural surplus that the U.S. wanted to dispose of. Audrey came to realize, however, that little attention had been paid to the dietary preferences of the Vietnamese who just wanted to be able to raise their own rice and chickens and be left alone. They could use the cooking oil, but they fed the bulgur wheat to their pigs. Many Asians are lactose-intolerant but the children liked a mixture of a small amount of the powdered milk, cornmeal and soy flour that was given, and it provided them with nutrition.

At the head of the Nha Trang office was Jim Delaney, a former U.S. Army officer who had been stationed in Vietnam, who signed up with Catholic Relief Services after he left the military. He was asked by Patricia Smith, an American doctor, to help her obtain a truck on which to build a much-needed mobile clinic so that she could travel about attending to the medical needs of rural Vietnamese.

It was then that Audrey was introduced to the vast amount of materials that were sent to Vietnam and lay rotting in the hot sun on the beach at Cam Ran Bay, a large city on the coast where the U.S. maintained a military base. The waste was overwhelming. It was there that Audrey became aware of a U.S. wartime-supply

corporation owned by six Texas millionaires whose initials were represented in the acronym name RMKBRJ—the “J” in the name stood for Lyndon Baines Johnson.

RMKBRJ kept large numbers of trucks sitting unused at this location. But Delaney's attempts to obtain one truck for use as a mobile clinic for Dr. Smith would never be realized due to the bureaucracy involved.

The Vietnamese people Audrey came into contact with rarely discussed the war itself. But the war was always present. The United States ally was the military in South Vietnam—the Army of the Republic of Viet Nam (ARVN). One of the characteristics of the army was that the families of the ARVN soldiers accompanied them wherever they were stationed, making military movements difficult and dangerous for all. The men would go out from enclaves to fight at night in the rice paddies and jungles, but come back to their families during the day. Another characteristic of the war was the presence of “cowboys” in the streets of Saigon— young men on motorcycles, sons of wealthy Vietnamese who managed to avoid the violence and stay out of the war. The nonmilitary Vietnamese men in the villages, who appeared to be loyal to South Vietnam during the day, became Viet Cong at night when the skies were filled with thunderous explosions and day-bright flares—they were what the U.S. and its allies considered the enemy because they fought against the U.S.-ARVN military.

U.S. bombing was continuous. The only force that ever stopped the bombings was hurricanes.

Helicopters were used by Americans to get from one place to another, and Audrey, like other Americans, used them frequently for her work with Catholic Relief Services. On the helicopters were phones, restricted to essential safety use, on the flights. On one occasion the pilot stopped talking and the helicopter flew straight up. On landing, Audrey asked what had happened and was told, “We were being shot at.” Audrey later reflected that at the time, she had been unfazed by this: had she been too busy, or had she become immune to the danger?

On another occasion, an incident occurred in which a CRS worker was wounded in an automobile accident. Audrey went to visit him at a U.S. medical hospital in Da Nang, which was providing care for wounded military personnel. It was there she encountered a multitude of wounded soldiers who had no visible signs of injury; these were suffering from what we now call post-traumatic stress disorder. Many of these soldiers were draftees who had never wanted to be any part of the military. There was tremendous drug addiction among them—all kinds of drugs. Marijuana was the most common. Other military would never leave the hospital. They were so severely wounded that they would not be transported home to the States. They were there to die.

Audrey's contract stated a definite time for her stay in Vietnam. In the middle of 1971, one and a half years after she had arrived, Audrey returned to the U.S. and a

convent in St. Louis Park, a Minneapolis suburb. She worked for the Minneapolis Health Department. After some months she decided to leave the convent and eventually married.

What effect did her experience in Viet Nam have on her? She watched the news each night, sobbing at the pictures of the continuing violence and terrified for the teachers she had known who, as the North Vietnamese were winning against their foreign occupiers and allies, were now at great risk for having worked with Americans.

Audrey had had a firsthand look while in Viet Nam at the consequences of war on children, women, and men—the civilians who, in every war, are the victims. She wrote to a local Twin Cities television news anchor and also to Walter Cronkite and told them that they weren't reporting the truth. She joined the demonstrations against the war.

“It was all so stupid,” she says of the war, “the destruction, the waste, the horrible deaths—the war itself. I think the President of the United States should be forced to participate in any war he/she authorizes.”

Audrey Kvist is a member of Women Against Military Madness. Polly Mann is the founder of Women Against Military Madness and contributes to the WAMM newsletter.