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Promoting Social Justice, Human Rights, and Peace

THE FRIENDSHIP VILLAGE

Produced & Directed by Michelle Mason (2002: 50 minutes)

Transcript courtesy of Bullfrog Films (www.bullfrogfilms.com)

George Mizo, President Vietnam Friendship Village Project: If I had my druthers, I would never speak about Vietnam. I would just stay in my cave, read my books, take care of my flowers (clears throat). But I know that that's not the reason I survived.

The Friendship Village, aside from my son and Rosi, is the most important thing in my life. An extended family. A place, from the beginning for me, of reconciliation, of healing, of hope. Also an important point for me is that we can make a difference in life, and I think the Friendship Village personifies that.

Narration: The Vietnam War ended more than 25 years ago. But the wounds of war take a long time to heal.

On a former rice paddy outside Hanoi, a new legacy of the war is under construction. Founded in 1992, The Vietnam Friendship Village is a treatment center and community housing more than 70 children and veterans with illnesses attributed to Agent Orange. The US Air Force sprayed Agent Orange during the war to remove Vietnam's dense jungles; The Vietnamese believe the dioxin in Agent Orange is responsible for more than 1 million birth defects. But the Friendship Village is more than a place of physical healing. It is also a vision of peace, realized in the hearts and minds of those who are building it.

Jim Tibbets, Vietnam Veteran: I'm here with a bunch of Americans that are active with the international village of friendship village. I came back to Vietnam to come back and visit it after all these years since the war. And it gives you a whole new perspective. I'm really glad that I've made this trip. (To child:) Huh? Aren't you?

Don Killion, Australian veteran: I was a medical adviser, supervisor, in the war in Hue. And I did bits and pieces. And I sort of achieved a bit here and bit there, and I came away dissatisfied with the work that I did. You know. I'd do things differently now, but now I've got this opportunity to help out here, which would be great.

Suel Jones, American Committee: See right now we have Germany, France, USA, England, Australia and Japan. But our whole idea here is to help the kids. And this is about peace and reconciliation. It's about people who have killed each other and fought, and can come together and be brothers again. And especially right now with what's going on in Afghanistan, we have to understand that we can come together, and we don't have to kill each other, and we don't have to hurt each other. There are ways, but we have to work at it and we have to find it, and we have to put ourselves out to do this.

Right now the children we work with mostly, we feel they can be rehabilitated. But now we want to build this new house over here for the kids that are so severely damaged they can't really be helped, all you can do is work with them.

Narration: Agent Orange has also affected the health of veterans exposed to the herbicide, including George Mizo, the village's founder. To him the Friendship Village is a living symbol of the potential for transformation that began with his journey to heal the wounds of war.

George Mizo: When I went to Vietnam I knew none of the history of Vietnam. None of us did at that time. Our country didn't even know any of the history. It was a disaster from the very beginning.

Newsreel: Asia and the western Pacific is a vitally important part of the world to the United States. Not only does this area contain a large percentage of all mankind and tremendous resources, but also it is the place where the communists are making vigorous and ruthless aggression

Narration: Before the war against the United States, Vietnam's struggle for independence had included over 2000 years of invasion by the Chinese, French, and Japanese. But in 1954 at the battle of Dien Bien Phu, Vietnamese nationalists led by Ho Chi Minh defeated their French landowners, ending 100 years of colonial rule. The Vietnamese had finally won independence, but freedom would come at a higher price

Dwight D. Eisenhower, US President: If Indochina goes, several things happen right away. The Crao peninsula, the last little bit of land hanging on down there, would be scarcely defensible. The tin and the tungsten that we so greatly value from that area would cease coming. So you see, somewhere along the line, this must be blocked.

George Mizo: I grew up believing that the United States was a great country.

I remember one of my first recollections when Eisenhower was running for President, was sitting on my father's shoulders, and he said: 'these are the men, these are the men who saved the free world. These are the men who stopped Hitler, Stalin, the Japanese.' So I grew up believing, you know, we were the good guys.

John Wayne cowboy scene: I think we're on the wrong side. This is no time to think.

Narration: As the son of a Native American, George had grown up with images of American valor and patriotism, from the Wild West to Washington, DC:

John F. Kennedy, US President: 'Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country.'

Narration: Inspired by his President's words, in 1963 George enlisted in the army where he served stateside until his discharge in 1966. Since the 1950s, the American government had been conducting a covert war in Vietnam; by 1965, it had escalated into an open conflict.

Marines 1965 landing, Universal newsreel: United States Marines head for security duty in South Vietnam where they will guard the American jet airfield against attack by Viet Cong guerillas and infiltrators from North Vietnam, only 80 miles away.

Lyndon B. Johnson, US President: So we must be ready to fight in Vietnam, but the ultimate victory will depend upon the hearts and the minds of the people who actually live out there. (Sounds of gunfire) The US never officially declared war on Vietnam, but by 1967 the war drums were beating loudly and George decided to re-enlist.

George Mizo: I felt that if my country was at war, I had to serve. My only condition was that I be in Vietnam within 5 days, and that I be assigned to a unit that was going to see a lot of combat. And I got my wish.

Narration: As a platoon sergeant in the combat zone, the all-American soldier began to question his country's motives in the war.

George Mizo: In the first few months, most of our battles centered around re-capturing from the Viet Cong, large plantations. And that was a shock to me. I had no idea that the United States had any financial interest in Vietnam.

Narration: Then in mid-67 the American mission changed, from harassment and interdiction, to search and destroy. Any village found hiding medical supplies, extra food, tunnels, or weapons, was destroyed.

George Mizo: So here we are killing the very people and destroying the very country that I thought we were coming over to protect.

You know, I became aware that the Vietnamese are an incredible people. I realized that they had an ancient culture and that they were a very peaceful people. So to be in that position was horrible.

Narration: By the fall of 1967, the 22-year-old Sergeant and his men had moved into the Que Son valley, where they were told that 4,000 North Vietnamese troops were trapped. The real number was 40,000.

George Mizo: But For us it was like whistling walking by a cemetery. We knew it was just a matter of time before we were overrun.

Narration: George's platoon fought around the clock and lost many men. By that point, the war had claimed so many casualties that the American government began to draft college students. One of them was named Wilbur.

George Mizo: It was around Christmas, but I got a young man named Wilbur. African American. And he had only been with me for a day or two and he asked to speak with me privately. He said, 'My religion forbids me to kill.' And I said I come from a Christian home also. And I was raised to believe that it was wrong to kill too, except in war. Except for your country.

He said, 'No it doesn't say that in the Commandments. Though shalt not kill except for communists. Thou shalt not kill except for people who disagree with our government. It says though shalt not kill period.'

Narration: As Wilbur began to voice his conscience; George began to hear his own misgivings about the war.

George Mizo: Then he asked me to help get him sent home. And I thought about it. And I thought about it. I mean these weren't just my men. These were friends. These were brothers. And I had a tremendous amount of pain for all of the friends I had lost, or who had lost arms or legs or both. So after weighing all of this, I told Wilbur: we would all like to go home. We're all terrified. This is horrible. It's a terrible mistake. But I don't feel that I could live with my conscience helping you get sent home and leaving these other men here to die. So I told him no.

Narration: On the night of January 3, the North Vietnamese hit all 3 American bases in George's area in an opening salvo of the 1968 Tet Offensive. Wounded by one of the first rockets, George continued to fight through the night.

(Sound of radio: 'this has been going on all night long. You just can't believe it')

George Mizo: It was just unbelievable. The one thing I can't remember from that night is where Wilbur was. I assigned Wilbur to be with me because I knew he was afraid and, but he wasn't there'

But during that battle I had another experience. I don't know how to describe it. For the first time, I saw clearly, in the middle of this battle. It was like everything stopped, and I was looking at a movie. I remember it like it was yesterday. And I remember saying 'this is bullshit, this isn't about democracy versus communism.

This isn't god's will. This is bullshit. This is horror created by man for whatever reasons, politicians or greed or whatever.' And at that instant, I knew that I would survive

Narration: At sunrise, a commanding officer ordered the wounded sergeant to be medivaced out.

George Mizo: And I was so torn. And I said I'm not going. We came together' ' and he said yes you are, that's an order. So I got on the helicopter and was flown to a hospital in Chu Lai, and then Japan and then to Fort Lewis, Washington. And it was some time during that time period when I learned that my unit had been overrun, and that they'd all been killed. And that's when I made the conscious decision to protest the war, and to refuse to be a soldier.

Angry vets: This is a commendation medal. F'k it!

Right on brother, right on

Narration: The decorated war hero returned home to find his wife pregnant with another man's baby, his father dying from Lou Gehrig's disease, and his country torn apart by the war in Vietnam.

George Mizo: I came back with an incredible amount of anger, and not at the Vietnamese, but at my government.

Narration: Arrested and imprisoned by the US Army after speaking out against the war, he was eventually released in 1971. During the next fifteen years he earned a psychology degree, worked as an activist and chef and, like the rest of the country, tried to put the Vietnam War behind him.

Ronald Reagan, US President: What we're seeing is the end of the post-Vietnam syndrome - the return of realism about the communist danger. Think of the signal we'll be sending to the rest of the world, when and if this aid to the freedom fighters in Nicaragua is passed.

Narration: In the mid-1980s George and other Vietnam veterans began to recognize an all-too-familiar pattern taking shape in the jungles of Central America. In 1986, he and three other veterans turned in their war medals and staged a 47-day fast on the steps of the US Capitol to raise awareness about US involvement in Nicaragua.'

George Mizo: Our guiding principle was the Nuremberg laws - that when a government acts contrary to the will of the law, the people not only have a right, they have a responsibility to speak out and to stop that violation.

George at Fast: And we especially as veterans I feel have a strong moral obligation to stop the killing. And we're willing to put our lives on the line. That's what we're

doing by our statements, with our fast, and in renouncing our medals. Thank you all for being here.

George Mizo: When I sat down on the steps of the capitol of Washington, we knew what the Reagan administration was doing. We knew about the covert activities and the contras and the death squads. That administration is in violation of my country's laws. And that's why we sat down on the steps and we said we're not moving.

Phil Donahue, Talk Show Host: They say they will die, to make their point.

George on Donahue: We want the American government to know there are at least 4 Americans who care enough about what's being done in their name, to make a sacrifice for it. We've done it for war, and if I can't do it, we can't do it for peace, then my life has no meaning.

Narration: On the 47th day of the fast, a doctor told the veterans that if they continued George would die within the week. Having achieved their goal of raising public awareness, they decided to end the fast.

George Mizo: The veterans fast for life for me was very, very significant for a lot of reasons. And one was that I saw what people can do. It ended up with us getting over 10,000 letters a day and people came to the steps by the thousands.

Interviewer at Fast: When did you hear about them?

Rosi H'hn-Mizo, George's Wife(President German Committee): I met George at the peace pilgrimage this summer in Germany

Interviewer: And learned he was going to do this.

Rosi Hohn-Mizo: And then I heard about the fast, and then I tried to support it in Germany, and then I decided to come here.

George Mizo: And that's when I realized it was people bringing people together, and stopping war, and creating the opportunities for reconciliation and for healing. But that experience made me aware how desperate people were to see it was possible. And that's when I started working for peace and justice for all people, and building the Village of Friendship as an example of what people can do if they set aside those differences and work together.

George Mizo: The roots of the Friendship Village stem from the desire of veterans from France, Japan, Great Britain, the United States and Vietnam who have come to the conclusion that we must find non-violent means to resolve conflict, and who want the Friendship Village to be an example of how people from different countries, different cultures and different backgrounds, even former enemies, can

put aside those differences to work together to create something that represents hope, healing, reconciliation

Rosi H'hn-Mizo: The very first meeting for the Village of Friendship was in Paris.

And I remember how they came out and said let's create a village. It was like wow that's a great idea, not having the slightest idea of how this is going to work out, and how you make it from this idea and this dream into something that would really work and be as helpful as it was intended

Georges Doussin, Vice President VFVP: When we first had this idea, people thought we were foolish. Even crazy. It was a good idea, but few believed it was possible. From the start, it was about creating a happier future for all humanity.

Narration: To oversee the project, the Vietnamese government created Vietnam's first veterans organization, electing General Tran Van Quang as its President. General Quang had been the field commander of all troops in George's area during the war. He was also the man who had planned and led the battle at Que Son, killing George Mizo's entire platoon.

George Mizo: The battle that I described previously, the battle of Que Son, General Quang was leading that battle and actually fighting in it. We've talked a lot about it, that night, over the years.

Sr. Lt.-General Tran Van Quang (Chairman, VFVP): During wartime I did not know George Mizo. I was the person who planned that battle. I met George after the war and we talked about that night. We could not have known each other as enemies. Fortunately, peacetime brought us together and we have become friends.

George Mizo: He's a beautiful human being. We formed a bond over the years that never in my wildest expectations would I have believed. He said 'Please, when you go back to the United States, tell the American people, we don't hate the American people. We did not drop our troops into the cornfields of Ohio or into this beautiful country to kill their children.

General Quang: We were always aware that there were two types of American people. The majority are good people and they are friends to our people. I will never forget the image of thousands of Americans who protested the war. But there is a small minority who represent the weapons manufacturers' monopoly. They are the ones who want to wage war.

Narration: More bombs were dropped over Vietnam and neighboring Laos and Cambodia than all of Europe during World War II. Unexploded bombs and landmines still litter the Vietnamese countryside, killing and maiming over 2,000 people each year.

But the war's most insidious legacy lives on in the soil. To uncover the enemy, the American military sprayed more than 72 million liters of the herbicide Agent Orange over Vietnam's jungles.

George Mizo: We had no idea when we were in Vietnam what they were spraying. I was told it was a mosquito spray, you know, harmless, don't worry about it.

Narration: Today, vast areas of South Vietnam remain contaminated with dioxin, a component of the defoliant and one of the deadliest chemicals known to mankind.

Ngyuen Khai Hung (Director, VFVP): The total land area sprayed with these poisonous agents was 2.9 million hectares.

Suel Jones: An American soldier like myself, I was here from oh about mid-68 to June of 69. I was actually sprayed. I used to see the planes flying over. We used to drink the water, and it would be in the water. But I was only here for a year. A lot of these soldiers here they were sprayed for 10 years. But still there are a lot of American veterans, a lot of Australian and Korean veterans, who have physical problems and their children have problems. I've had no physical problems that I know of, but my wife had two miscarriages. So, was it Agent Orange? We don't know.

Narration: In the areas sprayed, what was once triple canopy jungle has been reduced to invasive grasses and shrubs. Scientists estimate the dioxin will remain in the soil for 4-500 years.

'So if we go across, find ourselves the drainage ditch from the base, walk across and up a little, we should get it.'

Tom Boivin, The Hatfield Group: We started doing our dioxin research in Vietnam in 1994, which was only a couple of years after the country had opened up to the outside world. We transferred our knowledge and expertise in Canada on pulp mills to the situation here in Vietnam

We chose the Aluoi Valley as our study area particularly because it's a very isolated area, it's a very strategic location on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, which was very heavily bombed and sprayed repeatedly with Agent Orange throughout the American War.

Dave McCracken, Thailand Mine Action Center: Okay, so I'm just probing for a location that has no resistance, so when we take a sample we're not going to hit anything dangerous. This area was bombed, and perhaps there's bombies or unexploded ordinance here. The main threat we're concerned about is mines. They have an immediate reaction if you step on them.

Tom Boivin: Following our surveys we nailed it down that dioxins were especially prevalent in very high concentrations around the former A So military base, and it

was especially found in high concentrations in the soils as well as in the duck fat and fish fat.

The levels we're finding in people here in Aluoi are amongst the highest in the world. We've also shown, through some preliminary studies that the rates of birth defects here are higher than in other areas of Vietnam.

You're seeing long-term impacts of Agent Orange and dioxin through many generations, I guess for a couple of reasons. One is genetics, passing from soldiers and people who were exposed, passing it on to their children. Secondly, and perhaps most importantly, is you're also seeing continual exposure in the environment to this day.

The cultivation of the fields in these highly contaminated areas wakes up the dioxin that's buried in the soil. This has then now made it readily available to the people. It's entering their bodies, and then they are passing the dioxin to their children just through the genes or also through the breast milk.

The only real means of removing dioxins from the soil is through burning, or incineration. It would cost billions of dollars. What can be done, and what we have been doing here is trying to educate people through awareness programs, trying to teach the residents how to avoid contamination.

We've clearly demonstrated that 35 years following the spraying in Vietnam it's still an issue. It's not a historical issue. It's an issue that's still affecting people to this day. What we haven't been able to demonstrate is the direct linkage between Agent Orange concentrations in people and birth defects. The US is currently negotiating with the Vietnamese to this end, but these negotiations will take years to be completed

Bui Thi Hoi, Hoan's mother: My husband joined the army in 1968, and he fought for 6 years. When he returned, everything was fine and we had our first two children. Then our third and fourth children began to have health problems. Last month my husband went for a medical examination. He was told that his health has deteriorated and he is now incapable of working.

Nguyen Tien Tinh, Luyen's father: When I returned from the war, my skin started to feel itchy. I have headaches, nervous problems, blurred vision and hearing loss. I have 4 children, and 3 are affected by Agent Orange. One died.

Luyen: I feel sad that they sprayed the poison that made my dad sick.

George Mizo: In my case, in 1974, I suddenly got this huge rash. I got delirious. My fever was like 105. The bottom line was that, you know, we don't know what it is, but something is killing your immune system. So that was the first inkling that I had that I had been exposed to Agent Orange

Rosi H'hn-Mizo: George is definitely one of the bravest persons I have ever met. I don't know if I would be in his situation whether I would even manage to make it through one single day. The effects of AO are that his immune system doesn't work anymore, so he gets every infection that's flying around, which is really difficult because both of his heart attacks happened during an infection

Michael Mizo, George's son: How are you doing?

George Mizo: I'm great.

Narration: George's anti-war activities made him ineligible for veterans' benefits until 1998. After his first heart attack in 1987, he and his new family decided to live in Germany where he could receive the medical care he needed.

Rosi H'hn Mizo: George also as a late consequence of all the poison in his body has constant pain, especially in the joints. We also know that a third heart attack is very dangerous and he might not survive it, and that's a constant fear.

George with bunny: 'You don't need to be afraid. We're not going to hurt you'

Rosi: In January next year we are going to be having a 10-year anniversary of the German group. Our main job was basically to raise money, and we started very small and we are still not really a large group. We do a lot of fundraising with concerts, with bake sales with flea markets, with little actions of people.

George at bake sale: These beautiful human beings are doing what the project is all about. Their way of sharing, caring about those who don't have what we may have.

Rosi H'hn-Mizo: The original plan was that the whole village would cost \$2.5 million. We've raised a large part of that already. We have 8 family houses, we have the clinic, and we have the school. We are building a house for severely handicapped children, and I think we've come a long way.

Narration: The international committee intends that the village will become self-sustaining. In the meantime, committee members continue to raise money through grassroots efforts. Ironically the American committee has raised the least amount of money. To the international committee, it is a sign that the wounds of war have yet to heal.

George Mizo: For Americans, for 40 years now, Vietnam has been the big pink elephant in the living room that everybody doesn't want to see but is there. There is a lot of healing that has to go on, if we're to get beyond that pain. But to be able to get beyond that we have to confront our fears. Confronting our fears means meeting, sharing, learning how to trust with our former enemies. And it's very hard. It's very hard.

Vietnamese translator: They come from the war, and after the war they return to their village, and now they have two children. One of them is inside this house and he has mental problems.

Narration: Now the younger brother is starting to develop similar symptoms

Suel Jones: I was just curious is he like this all the time, day and night, or is he just excited because we're here?

Vietnamese translator: All day and all night.

Jim Tibbets: It never ends, you know, the war never ends. It's just kinda still going on. It's still hurting people, and its still killing people. I mean it was bad enough the suffering that was then, but you know to see that it's still going on today. It makes me angry, it makes me feel guilty, and it makes you feel so damn impotent, I guess is the word. You just can't There's just nothing you can do.

George Mizo: I believe very firmly what Gandhi said, 'it may seem insignificant what we do, but it's important that we do it.' Hope is an illusion.' If you want to create something, you have to actively work at it. And not hope that somebody else, somehow, some miracle is going to happen and people will come to come to their senses or whatever. We either will create a world of peace or we won't. But it's our choice.

Just in my lifetime, I've watched the American people for the first time in history stop a war in progress. I've watched the civil rights movement go from when I was a child when segregation was the law.' I have watched the American people stop the production of 112 nuclear power plants. None of these were started by huge organizations, by super heroes or heroines. Each and every one of those was started by one, two or a handful of people who said no.

General Quang: I believe that The Friendship Village and similar projects remind us that it is better not to make war but to cooperate peacefully with each other, not only for ourselves, but so future generations, our children and our grandchildren, can live safely, happily and have a good life.

Georges Doussin: The Village is a tiny little light, a tiny little light in this tunnel we're in. But with a little light, sometimes we can find the sun.

George Mizo: There's an old Jewish saying: he or she who saves one, saves the world. And I know that together we can literally stop that progression of what is in fact the suicide of this planet. I really believe what Gandhi said that 'evil can only exist when good people do nothing'. We can make a difference, each and every one of us.