

Searching for Sunday

Nearly 50 years ago, a US soldier in Vietnam saved a baby's life. Now he hopes to reconnect with her

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Bob Martin recalls vivid details of the day he found Roberta Sunday 48 years ago this month. It was a typical, hot and humid August day in Vietnam's Quang Tri province. A sergeant with C Troop, 3rd Sqdn., 17th Air Cav, Martin was leading a platoon to search an enemy bunker complex that had just been pummeled with U.S. bombs.

"It was our job to provide a damage assessment after the strikes," said Martin, now commander of VFW Post 889 in Coeur d' Alene, Idaho. "There were a lot of dead bodies. In one bunker, I found two dead NVA men and one woman dressed all in black. I imagine she had been supporting them."

As Martin turned to leave the bunker, he heard a faint sound, almost like a cough. He thought perhaps it was the sound of a rat because it wasn't coming from the people who were "obviously" dead. After hearing it again, he searched the bunker and discovered a naked baby girl under the woman's body.

"I thought, 'Oh my God, now what? I can't just leave her here,'" Martin recalled. "I wrapped her in one of the empty sandbags I always carried with me."

He had to haul the infant some 30 minutes back to the nearest landing zone to a waiting chopper.

"I was so afraid of getting ambushed while getting her out of there," Martin said. "I don't know what I would have done if we would have encountered the enemy. I was grateful that she never cried once."

The baby was alert, but she was shivering and had a piece of shrapnel in one of her thighs. At the LZ, Martin radioed his commanding officer who diverted the chopper to the nearby Quang Tri Catholic Hospital.

Two nuns greeted Martin and asked him to fill out a card with the baby's name, location

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where she was found and Martin's unit information. Of course, he did not know her name. He was encouraged by his fellow soldiers to name her "Roberta," since his first name is Robert. And since it was a Sunday, he decided on "Roberta Sunday" as her full name.

"I was only at the hospital for about five to 10 minutes and then I was gone," Martin said. "Over the years, though, I've wondered and wondered what happened to her after I left her there. Where is she now?"

That's a question being asked as far away as New Zealand. Beverly Hanson, Post 889 Auxiliary president, decided to help Martin track down Sunday.

"I knew after hearing this story, that this is a story that had to be told," Hanson said. "I could see the emotion and the feeling that Bob had toward this child he knew only for a very short amount of time."

Hanson did a Google search for "Roberta Sunday and Vietnam." Her search revealed an article about a blind Asian woman in her 40s who was working in New Zealand.

Her name was Roberta Sunday. Hanson didn't print off the article because she didn't see how, at the time, this woman would be connected to Vietnam. Now her online search results cannot be duplicated.

"What are the odds there is another woman with that name who is about the same age?" Martin asked.

Hanson's further research uncovered that nurses were sent from New Zealand from 1968 to 1974 to rescue Vietnamese orphans from Vietnam, perhaps as part of the Save the Children organization.

According to Ally Clelland, communications specialist with Save the Children New Zealand, this is unlikely.

"Unfortunately, our archives do not go back to the Vietnam War," Clelland said. "We are not even sure if Save the Children New Zealand had a presence in Vietnam at that time. It is possible that New Zealand nurses were there but they may have been sent by the government."

Wanting to help, Clelland tried the New Zealand Nurses Organization, but it doesn't hold records for individual nurses.

Hanson was not deterred. She emailed the New Zealand Parliament and reached out to a nurse from New Zealand. She tried getting in touch with people involved with adoption agencies in Vietnam and reunion groups.

Her efforts, while noble, have not produced the whereabouts of Roberta Sunday. Hanson is determined and continues her search.

“We are going to find this woman,” Hanson said. “I just feel it in my core.”

Martin is not giving up hope either. He said if Roberta Sunday is found, he’ll go to wherever she is, even if it does turn out to be New Zealand.

“If we find her, I’d go in a heartbeat to see her,” Martin said. “That would really be something to see her and know that something positive came out of that war.”

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