

G.I. Joe Story: Onward Catholic Soldier

Marine Veteran from Poconos Continues to Serve Vietnam Priest 45 Years After War

BUSHKILL — The movie “G.I. Joe: Retaliation” is currently showing in area theaters. The film features the usual shoot-‘em-up, stylized violence depicted when macho men armed to the teeth defeat the bad guys and good wins out over evil. The End.

Well, there’s a real-life “G.I. Joe” story unfolding in the Poconos, starring a 69-year-old Marine Vietnam veteran — yes, whose name is Joe — Joseph Mahoney, and a resilient Vietnamese bishop, Paul Hoan, who sports more machismo than any character Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson could ever portray.

“I learned to be a scrounger,” says Joe.

Before long, Capt. Mahoney’s path crossed that of Father Paul, a Vietnamese Catholic priest serving as an assistant pastor, who soon got promoted when his pastor was killed while dispensing the sacraments to outlying villages.

One day, Father Paul, who Joe describes as “always with a smile and enthusiasm, and undaunted by death and destruction,” said to his new Marine friend: “We need an orphanage and you need to get that for me. God will provide.”

And the priest was right.

Joe’s scrounging abilities

Another year in the Marines and a few more in the reserves was complemented by a traditional civilian life. Joe and his wife Gail would raise eight children while he enjoyed a nearly 40-year career in the insurance business, retiring as an industry executive in 2009.

End of story, right? Not quite.

It was not unusual for Joe to think quite often about the priest-friend he left behind a half a world away. But his thoughts were sobering, as he was certain that the courage of the selfless clergyman and his indomitable will to carry out his ministry, despite all opposition, would lead to his demise.

“I just figured he had a short life span, given what he was doing,” says Joe. “I even asked a Vietnamese priest I knew in California about Father Paul. He said, ‘he’s almost certainly dead and in an unmarked grave.’”

Joe’s contact with a fellow Marine veteran, who ventured back to Vietnam, seemed to confirm his fears. His Marine buddy returned to the U.S. with a written story telling of Father Paul’s death in 2001. Unbelievably, the communiqué concerning the funeral was mistranslated; indeed, Father Paul was at the funeral, not as the deceased — but as the celebrant!

Through the efforts of Father Vinny Dang, a Vietnamese refugee who along with his family escaped persecution in Southeast Asia, arrived in America and eventually was ordained a priest for the Diocese of Scranton, Joe learned that Father Paul was not only very much alive, but thriving.

The valiant priest had resettled about a thousand families and hundreds of orphans from Dong Ha to near Saigon — some 800 miles away — to avoid a Communist invasion. His apostolate was now serving and taking in multitudes of downtrodden and disabled, giving hope for a better way of life.

Forward to September of 2012. Joe was able to contact Father Paul by phone and, as

went into high gear, as he and his fellow soldiers were able to get their hands on some wet cement and scrap lumber. The Navy Seabees (construction crew) helped build a sewer system in the city of Dong Ha, the orphanage’s home.

“We got it up and running,” Joe recalls, “and the orphans that came were illiterate, hungry, sickly.” But helped poured in from Americans back home. The orphanage soon became a focal point of soldiers’ spouses and families, who were only too happy to send over as much material aid as possible.

Then came November 1968. U.S. Marine Corps Captain Joseph Mahoney’s tour in Vietnam ended.



Joe Mahoney and the Vietnamese priest he became close friends with during the Vietnam War 45 years ago — now Bishop Paul Hoan — are reunited last September at the bishop’s residence east of Saigon.

he relates, “we starting talking like it was 1968 again.” In two weeks, Joe was back in Vietnam, reunited with his long-lost friend, and seemingly reporting for duty again.

Joe soon realized a lot had happened not only to him but Father Paul in the last 44 years. Father Paul was now Bishop Paul, 80 years old, living in retirement, but still hard at work with the members of the religious order he founded — the Community of Charity and Social Service (CCSS). The men and women religious in the congregation take an additional vow of “serving the poorest of the poor.”

Just like old times, Joe pledged his support to do whatever he could to help the diminutive Catholic cleric with the heart of a lion. Only this time Joe was armed with the resources of the folks back home, particularly St. John’s Parish and its pastor, Father Jeff Walsh.

“When Joe returned from his trip to Vietnam and shared what he saw, and the good works being directed by this ‘saintly bishop,’” Father Jeff says, “I felt compelled to at least consider a way we could help as a parish.”

The Parish Pastoral and Finance Councils of St. John’s, Father relates, has now established a special relationship with Bishop Paul’s community in Vietnam, in particular, setting aside one second

collection a year to benefit their clean water projects.

This coming weekend, the former Marine Captain will speak at all Masses at St. John’s Church and present a personally produced DVD to give fellow parishioners a glimpse of the humanitarian work being done in Vietnam. The following weekend, during the Masses for Pentecost Sunday, the parish will designate a second collection to benefit the mission in Vietnam.

“Our goal is to raise \$10,000 in five years,” Father Jeff relates, “roughly the cost of providing one clean water system.”

“I am grateful for a man like Joe Mahoney,” Father continues. “He was a soldier in the Vietnam War who never lost his sense of humanitarian aid during the war, and had the courage to return to this land 40 years later on a mission to see that humanitarian aid continues.”

“He is determined to help this bishop and religious community provide for the needs of the poor. It will be an honor for our parish to play a small part in furthering the cause of justice and peace.”

Anyone wishing to donate to the humanitarian work of Bishop Paul and his community in Vietnam, may do so through the CCSS presence in Biloxi, Miss., where Sister Cecelia Nguyen is the American contact person. The English web site is: www.bacaixahoi.org.



Father Jeff Walsh and Joe Mahoney at Mass last weekend at St. John’s in Bushkill.

For Joe Mahoney, a Buffalo, N.Y., native who settled in the Poconos and the parish of St. John in Bushkill six years ago, the story began when he was a Marine Corps Captain serving as an infantry officer in the Vietnam War in 1968 — very near the DMZ (demilitarized zone) separating North Vietnam from the South.

A Marine Colonel singled Joe out one day for what would become some very hazardous duty. “He told me,” Joe relates, “you’re getting a second job as a civil affairs officer.” He quickly learned the job entailed being stationed at the end of the supply pipeline, subject to heavy combat, and with little or no supplies or support.