

BENGE, MICHAEL DENNIS

Name: Michael Dennis Benge

Rank/Branch: U.S. Civilian

Unit: Agency for International Development

Date of Birth: 6 August 1935

Home City of Record: Oregon

Date of Loss: 31 January 1968

Country of Loss: South Vietnam

Loss Coordinates: 124049N 1080235E (AQ800030)

Status (in 1973): Released POW

Category:

Acft/Vehicle/Ground: Ground

Refno: 1008

Other Personnel in Incident: Betty Ann Olsen; Henry F. Blood (both captured); Rev. Griswald (killed); Carolyn Griswald (daughter of Rev. Griswald, survived first attack, died of wounds); Rev. Zeimer (killed); Mrs. Robert Zeimer (wounded, first attack, evaded, survived); Rev. & Mrs. Thompson; Miss Ruth Whilting (all killed)

Source: Compiled by Homecoming II Project 30 June 1990 from one or more of the following: raw data from U.S. Government agency sources, correspondence with POW/MIA families, published sources, interviews. Updated by the P.O.W. NETWORK 1998 with material from Michael Benge.

REMARKS: 730305 RELEASED BY PRG

SYNOPSIS: Michael D. Benge was born in 1935 and raised on a ranch in eastern Oregon. After college at Oregon State, he applied to the CIA, because he wanted to travel the world. CIA told him to try the Agency for International Development (AID). AID sent him to International Voluntary Services (IVS). After two years in Vietnam with IVS, Benge transferred to AID and served as an AID agricultural advisor. By the time of the Tet offensive of 1968, he had been in-country five years, working almost the whole time with the Montagnards in the highlands. He spoke fluent Vietnamese and several Montagnard dialects.

On January 31, 1968, Benge was captured while riding in a jeep near Ban Me Thuot, South Vietnam. Learning of the Tet offensive strikes, Benge was checking on some IVS volunteers who were living in a hamlet with three companies of Montagnard rebels who had just been through a lot of fighting as the NVA went through the Ban Me Thuot area. His plan was to pick up the IVS "kids" and then go down to pick up some missionaries in the area.

Benge was captured a few miles from the Leprosarium at Ban Me Thuot. This center treated anyone with a need as well as those suffering from leprosy. It was at the Leprosarium that Rev. Archie Mitchell, Dr. Eleanor Vietti and Daniel Gerber had been taken prisoner in 1962. The Viet Cong regularly harassed and attacked the center in spite of its humanitarian objectives. During the Tet offensive, the Viet Cong again tried to wipe out the Christian missionary influence in Dar Lac Province, and over a three day period attacked the hospital compound several times.

Betty Ann Olsen was born to Missionary parents in Bouake, Ivory Coast. She had attended a religious school and missionary college in Nyack, New York. Curious about the way the other part of the world lived, she went to Vietnam in 1964 as a missionary nurse for Christian and Missionary Alliance, and was assigned to the Leprosarium at Ban Me Thuot. Henry F. Blood was a missionary serving as translator and linguist for Wickeliff Translators at the Leprosarium.

Wickham Translators at the Leprosarium.

During one of the earlier attacks on the hospital compound, three staff homes were destroyed, one housing Rev. Griswald, who was killed, and his grown daughter Carolyn, who survived the explosion but later died of her wounds. During the same attack, Rev. and Mrs. Zeimer, Rev. and Mrs. Thompson and Miss Ruth Whiting were trapped and machine gunned. Only Mrs. Zeimer survived her 20-30 wounds and was later evacuated to Cam Ranh Bay. Blood and Olsen escaped injury for the moment. Two days later, on February 1, 1968, as Olsen was preparing to escape with the injured Griswald, she and Henry Blood were captured during another attack on the hospital.

For the next month or so, Bengé, Blood and Olsen were held in a POW camp in Darlac Province, about a day's walk from Ban Me Thuot, and were held in cages where they had nothing to eat but boiled manioc (a large starchy root from which tapioca is made). The Vietnamese kept moving their prisoners, hiking through the jungles and mountains. The camp areas, swept very clean of leaves to keep the mosquito population down (and the ensuing malaria threat), were clearly visible from the sky. Once, Bengé reports, an American aircraft came so close to the camp that he could see the pilot's face. The pilot "wagged his wings" and flew away. The Vietnamese, fearing rescue attempts and U.S. air strikes, kept moving.

For months Olsen, Blood and Bengé were chained together and moved north from one encampment to another, moving over 200 miles through the mountainous jungles. The trip was grueling and took its toll on the prisoners. They were physically depleted, sick from dysentery and malnutrition; beset by fungus, infection, leeches and ulcerated sores.

Mike Bengé contracted cerebral malaria and nearly died. He credits Olsen with keeping him alive. She forced him to rouse from his delirium to eat and drink water and rice soup. Mike Bengé describes Olsen as "a Katherine Hepburn type...[with] an extra bit of grit."

In the summer of 1968, the prisoners, again on the trail, were left exposed to the rain during the rainy season. Hank Blood contracted pneumonia, weakened steadily, and eventually died in July. (July 1968 is one of the dates given by the Vietnamese - the other, according to classified information the U.S. gave to the Vietnamese through General John Vessey indicates that Mr. Blood died on October 17, 1972. Mike Bengé says Blood died around July 4.) Blood was buried in a shallow grave along the trail, with Olsen conducting grave-side services.

Bengé and Olsen were kept moving. Their bodies were covered with sores, and they had pyorrhea from beri-beri. Their teeth were loosening and gums infected. They spent a lot of time talking about good meals and good places to eat, planning to visit their favorite restaurants together when they went home. They moved every two or three days.

Bengé and Olsen were moved near Tay Ninh Province, almost to Da Lat, then back to Quang Duc Province. Olsen was getting weak, and the Vietnamese began to kick and drag her to keep her moving. Bengé, trying to defend her, was beaten with rifle butts. Just before crossing the border into Cambodia, Olsen weakened to the point that she could no longer move. Ironically, in this area, near a tributary to the Mekong river, fish and livestock abounded, and there was a garden, but the food was denied to the prisoners. They were allowed to gather bamboo shoots, but were not told how to cook it.

Bamboo needs to be boiled in two waters to extract an acid substance. Not knowing this, Olsen and Bengé boiled their food only once and were beset with immobilizing stomach cramps within a half-hour; diarrhea soon followed.

Betty Ann Olsen weakened and finally died September 29, 1968 (Vessey information indicates this date as September 26), and was buried by Bengé. Finally, Bengé was taken to Cambodia, turned over to the North Vietnamese, and another long, grueling trek began. Bengé, however, had made his mind up that he wouldn't die. He treated his ulcerated body by lying in creeks and allowed small fish to feed off the dead tissue (a primitive debridement), then caught the fish and ate them raw. He caught small,

green frogs and swallowed them whole. He did everything he could to supplement his meager food ration.

By the time he reached the camp the Vietnamese called "the land of milk and honey" his hair was white and he was so dehydrated and emaciated that other POWs estimated his age to be over seventy years old. He was, at the time, only thirty-three. After a year in Cambodia, Benge was marched north on the Ho Chi Minh Trail to Hanoi. He spent over three years in camps there, including a total of twenty-seven months in solitary confinement. Upon his return, he verified collaboration charges against eight of his fellow POWs, in a prosecution effort initiated by Col. Theodore Guy (this action was discouraged by the U.S. Government and the effort was subsequently abandoned.) Mike Benge then returned to Vietnam and worked with the Montagnards until the end of the war.

The Vietnamese have never attempted return the remains of Henry Blood and Betty Olsen. They are two individuals that the Vietnamese could provide a wealth of information on. Since they pride themselves on being "humanitarians," it would not be in keeping with this image to reveal the horror Olsen and Blood endured in their hands. It is not surprising, then, that the Vietnamese have not publicly told their stories. Olsen and Blood are among nearly 2500 Americans, including several civilians, who are still unaccounted for, missing or prisoner from the Vietnam war. Since the war ended, over 10,000 reports have been received concerning these missing Americans which have convinced many authorities that hundreds are still alive in communist hands. While Blood and Olsen may not be among them, they went to Vietnam to help. They would not turn their backs on their fellow man. Why has their own country turned its back on them?

SOURCE: WE CAME HOME

copyright 1977 Captain and Mrs. Frederic A Wyatt (USNR Ret),
Barbara Powers Wyatt, Editor

P.O.W. Publications, 10250 Moorpark St., Toluca Lake, CA 91602

Text is reproduced as found in the original publication (including date and spelling errors).

MICHAEL D. BENGE

Civilian

Captured: January 28, 1968

Released: March 5, 1973

From 1956 through 1959 I served in the Marine Corps. After I completed my tour of duty, I returned to Oregon State University and completed my studies in Mechanical Technology in Agricultural Engineering. I served with the International Volunteer Services (the forerunner of the Peace Corps), in Vietnam from 1963 to 1965, as an advisor in education and agriculture. I joined the Agency for International Development (AID), in January 1965 and returned to Vietnam to work chiefly with the Montagnards (an aboriginal people of the Malayan-Polynesian extraction living in the western highlands). Here I acted as a civilian economic and community development advisor to the Darlac province chief. During this period I was named the adopted son of a tribal chief and his wife. The brass bracelets given to me by the Montagnards were removed when I was captured. However, since my return I am again wearing the bracelets.

Three years later on January 28, 1968, while attempting to group people for evacuation, I was captured by the North Vietnamese in South Vietnam. For five silent years I endured forced marches through South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, into North Vietnam. I was tortured by the hands of the Communists for my "bad attitude". While in captivity I was kept in solitary confinement for 27 months. At intervals I was forced to maintain a difficult position on my knees with my hands over my head for between 11 and 16 hours at a time. If I dropped my hands I was beaten. While

between 11 and 16 hours at a time. If I dropped my hands I was beaten. While marching for several months, I had only a small amount of rice and salt to eat. Perhaps once or twice a month I received a tiny portion of monkey or lizard meat. I ate anything I could pick up or catch, small crabs, frogs, minnows, bugs, etc. If caught doing this I was beaten so I swallowed them raw when no one was looking.

About two months after I was captured I came down with cerebral malaria. During this period of time I was delirious for thirty-five days and suffered periodic blindness. No medical assistance was offered. As a result of malnutrition, I began suffering from beri-beri, scurvy, jungle ulcers, loss of hair, and loose teeth. From 160 my weight decreased to less than 100 lbs. As I marched through Cambodia and Laos I passed an endless stream of North Vietnamese uniformed soldiers walking South and supplies being trucked from Port of Sianookville, Cambodia and from Hanoi. In Cambodia and Laos there were rest camps every four hours along the trail flying the North Vietnamese flag.

The 85 men held captive with me would never had been taken prisoner if the U.S. had struck the safe havens in Cambodia prior to the launching of the Tet offensive in 1968. The only reason the P.O.W.'s were released was because the Americans eventually bombed Hanoi. I was taken all the way to Hanoi. In the early part of December 1969, I spent about two months in a camp in Laos somewhere around Highway 9. I was then trucked into Hanoi and taken to a camp outside of the city. At this location I was put into solitary confinement for the next year, seeing no other American. I was kept in an isolation hut, where they had sealed off all of the ventilation holes allowing no air. The walls were painted black with coal dust and cement. There was no light. I had contact with no one else. The room was filled with mosquitoes and flies. There was one hole in the back of the hut which allowed little or no air to come in. Only rats! And frequently I had eight or ten of them with me. My well was right outside the hut. About fifteen yards uphill they had placed a cesspool. Every time it rained the water turned brown with pollution.

The free people of South Vietnam learned the nature of the North Vietnamese communists in 1968 when they invaded Hue. The systematic massacre that followed belied the N.V.A.'s persuasive propaganda. First they murdered thousands on their lists of opponents or neutralists. Then they turned on the pro-communists and student groups whom they did not consider reliable. Then as they retreated they killed anyone they thought might have witnessed the wholesale slaughter. Two missionaries, with whom I was imprisoned, told of seeing six other missionaries, in Ban Me Thuot, gunned down in cold blood as they emerged from bunkers with their hands over their heads. Two women missionaries in Laos were tied inside grass huts by the NVA and burnt to death. In another area three villages were overrun by the North Vietnamese and they drove the women and children into a ditch and burnt them alive with flame-throwers.

I was elated when I first learned of the peace talks. However, even with peace and my return home I continue trying to awaken the people in the U.S. and elsewhere about many facts of the Vietnam war. I am very concerned about the American, South Vietnamese and third country prisoners of war who are still held by the North Vietnamese. We have documented proof of 53 Americans whom the North Vietnamese had captured and used for propaganda purposes. There has been no accounting of them on any of the POW or MIA lists. I feel that the North Vietnamese may use the remaining prisoners to justify to their people their claim of winning the war.

I am happy to have been home to rejoin my mother, father, and sister even for such a short period of time. At present I am still a bachelor and have returned to college in the Philippines for my M.S. degree in community development. I returned to South Vietnam for four months to see my many friends. I shall again return to work again with

the Montagnards in Vietnam if "The Tide Doesn't Turn Red." Unlike many others, my going to Vietnam wasn't just "Doing My Thing". I still feel that I have a commitment. A commitment that "they too might have the freedom of choice, of beliefs and political alternatives."

It was great to return to America and be back in a country, even with all its social ills, where one can enjoy the freedom of speech, the freedom of thought, and the freedom of political choice in the free world, things that are unknown to those, still in the lands where I was held as a POW.

Date: Wed, 23 Sep 98
From: "Mike Bengé"
Subject: BIO

Michel Dennis Bengé (Mike) was born on August 6, 1935 in Denver, CO, and grew up on a ranch in Eastern Oregon, where for a time, he rode brahma bulls and bareback horses in rodeos. He joined the Marine Corps in 1956, achieved the rank of sergeant, and was honorably discharged in 1959. He completed his undergraduate studies in Agricultural Engineering at Oregon State University in 1962.

In 1963, he joined the International Voluntary Services (a forerunner of the Peace Corps), and served for two years in the Central Highlands in South Viet Nam, working mainly with the Montagnards (a French term for people of the mountains). He is fluent in both Vietnamese and Rhade (the major ethnic minority dialect). In 1965, he joined the United States Agency for International Development, and served as a provincial development officer in the Central Highlands of South Viet Nam. He received three of medals from the government of South Viet Nam for outstanding work in public administration, public health, and ethnic minority affairs.

While serving in that capacity, he was captured by the North Vietnamese during the "Tet Offensive" on January 28, 1968. His capture resulted from attempting to rescue four Americans housed in a section of town that had been overrun by a North Vietnamese battalion. Mr. Bengé was credited with rescuing 11 Americans prior to his capture, and for this, received the State Department's highest award for heroism. He also received a second award for valor for his actions during captivity.

Mr. Bengé was held in numerous camps in South Viet Nam, Cambodia, Laos and North Viet Nam. He spent 27 months in solitary confinement and one year in a "black box." While in the "Plantation Gardens," he served as Col. Ted Guy's deputy, and was released during "Operation Homecoming" in 1973. While on medical leave, he returned to Viet Nam and continued his work with the Ministry of Ethnic Minorities. In 1974, he was assigned to the USAID Mission in the Philippines. After the fall of Viet Nam in 1975, he assisted in processing Vietnamese refugees to go to the U.S. In 1978, he completed a Master's Degree in Agroforestry at the University of the Philippines at Los Banos. In 1979, he rotated to USAID headquarters in Washington, DC, continuing his work in international development, forestry and environment. For outstanding achievements in international forestry, Mr. Bengé received an award from the King of Sweden, which was patterned after the prestigious Nobel Peace Prize. He continues his work with USAID, and resides in Falls Church, VA. He is a single parent to two daughters, ages 16 and 11. He is active in POW/MIA affairs, and other South East Asian political issues.