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Physician, established hospital in Kontum for Montagnards,
1959-1975.

Please state your name and a little about your background.

Patricia M. Smith. I grew up in Seattle and graduated from medical school at the University of Washington, went back to Cincinnati to intern and then was working down in Kentucky when I heard of a group of Catholic lay women called the Grail that were sending people overseas. So I volunteered to go someplace for two years and I didn't really care where. They asked if I'd go to Vietnam. I said, "Sure. Where's Vietnam?" And that's how I got to Vietnam. I didn't know there was going to be a war over there or I don't think I would have gone because I wasn't anxious to -- you know, I'm not crazy. But all the reports in the United States at that time in 1958-59 was that all the troubles were over in South Vietnam. The country had been divided and was ruled by this wonderful man Ngo Dinh Diem and that everything was really hunky-dory and there was an organization called Friends of Vietnam that had a good many prominent Americans as part of their board. Everything was going to be great. So that's how I happened to get there.

Were you prepared by anyone -- did you have any training in the language and culture?

I read everything I could get -- Actually, in the New York Library in 1959 there were exactly two books about Vietnam and one of them had practically nothing in it. But I read those and did get in touch with the organization, the Friends of Vietnam, and I did not really have time for a real tropical medicine course but did tour down to Louisiana to Carville to a leprosarium and learn a little bit about leprosy because I knew nothing. And this was one of the few things I knew about the place that I was going in Kontum up in the Highlands is a leprosarium there. Cause I was going to stay at the leprosarium to begin with. So I learned a little bit about leprosy and I took some classes at Berlitz in French because of course they didn't offer Vietnamese or any of the Montagnard dialects there or anyplace else. So I did those things in advance and then went to Vietnam in -- let's see, I guess I arrived the first week in July. Either the end of June or the first week in July of 1959.

In reading material about you, I was under the impression that the Bishop of Kontum had requested you.

Well, not exactly. What happened was that the Nun who ran the leprosarium there had asked Catholic Relief Services in Saigon if they could find a nurse or even a practical nurse to help out at the leprosarium. And the Grail organization that I was with at that time said, "Well, no, they had their nurses all slated

to go to some of the places that they were running in Africa and South America but they had a doctor that they didn't know what to do with because they didn't think she was typical Grail and they'd be glad to send a doctor. So when the Bishop heard that he said, "Well, not just for the leprosaorium. This is for the whole area because there are no doctors here." So that's how it happened.

How was medicine practiced in Kontum when you arrived?

It wasn't. There was something called a Province Hospital which was a joke. At the time that I first arrived there was a man running it who had never been to medical school at all. He had a degree in chemistry. And I suspect it was very much undergraduate degree because the man knew absolutely nothing. The Montagnards didn't go there. Some of the Vietnamese went there. And there were Vietnamese living in the town of Kontum and also some out in some resettlement villages that had been established after 54 by the South Vietnamese government where they thought that if they put some of their Vietnamese out in certain areas that it would be more of a deterrent to Communism. Which was pretty silly actually. There were more Communists among those people living in resettlement villages than there ever were among the Montagnards.

Were these the strategic hamlets?

No. Strategic hamlets were something else. Those were developed later on and there it was usually a question of simply going in and telling the people you build a fence around your village and put the pungi stakes up so that you have defense against the VC. OK. They went to the Montagnards and told them to do that and went to these other resettlement areas too, there were only a few of them in the province, and told them to do this. Well, Montagnards would do this as they were told and the VC came the next night and said you take all those down or we'll kill every one of you. So they took them all down. And then the South Vietnamese came again and they kept going around and around. It was great fun. And it was a bunch of nonsense. They didn't know what they were doing with strategic hamlets. I mean, Americans -- I have always said that when the definitive book is written about the American presence in Vietnam it should be called "The Naive American." Our Americans, I think that most of them were over there with all the good will in the world and with zero in the way of know-how. All the way from the Ambassador to the USAID people to the military -- every one of them. I found myself apologizing to people of other nationalities. I had some good friends that were British with grandchildren there, and apologizing to them for the caliber of the people the United States sent over there. I said, "We've got better at home believe it or not."

What about the war in 1959?

Well, it was on. You know, as I said, I had been led to believe that everything was at peace. It wasn't. And one of the first things actually, within the first day or two of the time I arrived in Saigon, one of the military advisory groups that the United States had over there at that time, there were just

little groups of ten to fifteen men in one place that were suppose to act as advisors to the Vietnamese Army, and the one just outside of Saigon was attacked and several Americans were killed within the first couple of days. And when I got up to the Highlands, I discovered that there wasn't really much in the way of shooting still going on but, as a matter of fact there was nothing, but the VC were out propogandizing the people at that point. And at times even taking them forcibly to use them as porters for their maneuvers and so forth and trying to build up a larger cadre and using people either voluntarily or involuntarily. So, it wasn't exactly a real peaceful place.

How did you adjust?

Well, with difficulty. I mean, to begin with there was absolutely nothing except the early instruments which weren't anything like what I had or the ones I brought with me. Medications were severely limited. The leprosarium was really a kind of a disaster even though the French Nun who was an original character, did her best. She had some funny ideas sometimes. Their dispensary was a dirt floored place with river water used to cleanse the wounds that the patients with leprosy had before they put the dressings on them. They were, most of them getting DDS which was the standard treatment for leprosy then. There were efforts being made to limit the contact with the children -- not too successful at that time. As the years went on they became more successful at getting the children away from the parents most of the time anyway. Trying to limit the amount of contagion that was going to occur. And Leprosy probably had a higher incidence there than any place in the world. But compared to their other health problems, leprosy was not really important because it didn't kill very many people. Two thirds of the children were dying before they grew up. Some rates were probably three fourths.

What were the main causes of this?

Infectious disease, Malaria -- Malaria was real high on the list. If they survived the first few years of life they were probably semi-immune to malaria and they weren't going to have a lot of trouble after that. Tuberculosis was just rampant. A big killer of the babies was tetanus from the contamination of the umbilical cord. Typhoid, just all the ordinary -- pneumonia, plague we got later, we didn't have it when I first got there. Meningitis, you know, all those, the ordinary things that you'd find in anyplace except in much, much larger numbers in addition to the tropical diseases like the typhoid, malaria.

Tell me about getting there and what you did at first and where you worked. What kind of a working arrangement did you have.

Well, for the first six months I lived at the leprosarium. And just had a room in the sisters convent to begin with. And then had a more private little building of my own. Then worked at the leprosarium itself and also made trips out to the villages partly to detect leprosy but also we started making village trips was when I began to see all the other diseases. Some of the people would come for help if you went to the village.

There were also a few people in the town that when they heard there was a doctor around wanted very much to be seen and would even come out to the leprosarium to be seen. Which ordinarily the Vietnamese would never come near the leprosarium. It was in a very bad place but -- and also of course, worked taking care of any sick nuns or priests from the area. Other than that the local people were not terribly interested. The Vietnamese were. The Vietnamese, as I said, would even come out to the leprosarium to be seen. But it became terribly obvious right from the start that it was the Montagnards that really needed the help. They were the sickest and the poorest of the lot. And, so more, and more I tried to concentrate on the Montagnards. And after six months I got a house in the town itself. Still visited the leprosarium but no longer lived there, and started a clinic in the house itself to see people in the same place I lived. Then after a year, an American nurse joined me and at that point we didn't have any room in the house to be seeing patients so the Bishop gave us a little building up the road a piece and we started seeing patients there. That was meant to be an outpatient facility but before we were finished we were hospitalizing people there -- I guess you should use the term "hospitalizing" in quotes because it was only a room with five beds that just had boards on them and we put the sickest patients on -- but it soon expanded. The five beds were not only occupied but every space on the floor was occupied and the surrounding area, in fact, Joan, the first nurse that was with me would say when somebody came along and obviously needed to stay for treatment because they came quite a ways and couldn't go back and forth or were just plain too sick to go home, they'd ask where they're suppose to stay, she'd say, "under any tree is fine." So we had a whole camp around us actually. And at that point we were still making a good many visits out to the villages because the Montagnards were not coming in great numbers. It took them-- well, I must say after, probably around a year they were coming in greater numbers. They found that it worked. One of the things, probably that we got the biggest reputation about was being able to treat their severe diarrhea and vomiting ailment. They'd consider it 100 percent lethal. And it was if they didn't get I.V. fluids. I.V. fluids was the -- it was a miracle for them. And we would go out to the house and hang the I.V. fluids in the hut and go ahead and give it to them and it was Joan, the first nurse who finally got brave enough to say, "well let's show them how to change the bottles so we don't have to stay here all night." We'd pour it into them all night then we'd come around in the morning to see how they're doing. We showed them how to change the bottles -- what we thought would be about right for them. And there were a lot of people that lived that would otherwise have been dead.

When you first got there were you the only American woman in the area?

Yeh. There were no other American women anyplace. There were a few American men at the military advisory group and they used to have a steak cook out every Saturday night and within a few weeks of the time I got there they asked me to come over to their steak cook out, which I did. And that was when I got sick. And the Nun who ran the leprosarium, Sister Mary Louise,

thought this was hilarious. When I was sick the next day she said, "Here you've been eating here and everything's been fine, you've had no trouble and go out in the villages and even eaten some of their food -- no problems, and you eat the American foods -- you get sick."

Sister Mary Louise, was she French?

Yeh.

Were the Nuns French in the area?

Well, no. Not entirely. They were mostly Vietnamese actually. These were the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul. And the -- originally a French order. I think their are some in the States as well. And she was the only French woman at the leprosarium. She had two or three Vietnamese nuns who worked with her. They also belonged to the same order. In the town their were two French nuns, one of whom had a --ran the boarding school and day school for Montagnard girls and orphanage for Montagnard infants. And the other one directed a group of Montagnard Nuns. They were a diocesan order only, and then just for the Montagnards, and she was their superior. So we had three French women in the area.

Tell me a little about the Montagnard people.

Well, they're the aborigines of Vietnam. In fact, the aborigines of all Southeast Asia. In fact one time undoubtedly occupied the whole of the country, were driven up into the highlands by the migration of the southern Chinese who became the present day Vietnamese. They defended themselves successfully against any Vietnamese encroachment until around 1850 or so. And that was when the first French missionaries walked up and they were hoping to find a place where they could have a seminary for Vietnamese boys free of persecution because they were being slaughtered like mad by the Mandarins down on the coast at that time. And they got up into the highlands, up til then the Vietnamese wouldn't venture up into the highlands, which most of them didn't want to do anyway. They didn't like it. Said it was too cold and savages lived up there. The Montagnards usually would confirm their belief by either killing them or selling them as slaves over into Laos and Cambodia. But when the Frenchmen came, they saw something different. They all sported these big bushy beards. And of course, all orientals in general don't grow beards until they're quite aged and then it's kind of a wispy affair. So this was extremely impressive to them and that plus their pale skins convinced them that these were some kind of Gods and that they better leave them alone. So they did. Unfortunately, disease didn't leave them alone and most of them were either dead or so sick they had to go back to France within five years. But anyway gradually they established a presence in the highlands and they brought the Vietnamese with them and the Montagnards were kind of opened up. The Montagnards were primarily -- you know they were left pretty much alone, even though they did have some contact with the French but not a great deal. Very little contact with the Vietnamese and they preferred to keep it that way. The Vietnamese looked down on them. Called them the "moi" -- the