

Link October 1980

Remain aware: pray above all

"I can't put my finger on a particular day when I asked Jesus into my heart. I grew up in a Christian home, and I can remember Dad taking Lois, John and me to a Billy Graham crusade in Manchester when I was about eleven or twelve. I went forward at the end, but there's no one time I can point to and say, 'That's when I became a Christian'."

Robert Ashe was educated at Christ's Hospital School, Horsham, and when the time came for him to decide on a career, he couldn't! Knowing only that he did *not* want to work in an office or factory, he opted to take English and French at A level, because they were his best subjects.

One summer holiday, he worked on a farm near Leamington (where the Ashe family then lived) and, deciding that farm life appealed to him more than anything else he had then considered, he applied to, and gained a place at, the Royal Agricultural College, Cirencester.

"I failed my A levels," he said cheerfully, but that didn't affect his plans. All students do one year's practical work on a farm, prior to spending two years in college. Robert worked on the same farm in Leamington and learned, he says, a number of things from his employer which have stood him in good stead in his work in Thailand. For one thing, Mr. Whitfield (the farmer) was a great one for finding the quickest way to do a job, and Robert has put this into practice in such matters as milk distribution and self-help programmes with refugees. Accounting was also part of the course and has proved very useful.

On leaving Cirencester, Robert went to Saigon with Project Vietnam Orphans. His first job was to mend a Landrover! After a few days he became ill, and as time went on he was obviously very sick indeed with amoebic dysentery, which refused to respond to treatment. Robert says that he found this time very difficult. Knowing that he was where God wanted him to be, he couldn't help but wonder what good he was, flat on his back, too weak to do anything.

Three months after going to Vietnam, he

returned to this country. Tests at the Hospital for Tropical Diseases revealed that his system was clear. Looking back, Robert says that he can see God's purpose in the time he spent ill in Vietnam. Although the Vietnamese and Thai peoples are different, he learnt much about the ways of the East which has been invaluable in the work in Thailand.

In September 1975, Robert returned to the Far East, this time to Bangkok, where he was initially in charge of a houseful of twelve Cambodian children awaiting adoption. The following year he started work at the camp at Aranya Prathet. There, about three thousand refugees were housed – half of them sleeping on raised platforms, the others on the ground below. A section at the end of the camp was cleared, and Robert supplied tools and seeds for an agricultural project. A good crop of maize and groundnuts was about two feet high, when a period of intensive raiding by the Khmer Rouge caused the arrival of three thousand more refugees. Homes for these people had to be built over the plants. . . .

More recently, Robert has spent less time travelling between the three camps with which Christian Outreach is involved and has been working mainly on the Thai-Cambodian border, on what is known as the Landbridge, organising the distribution of food supplies by relief agencies. The desperate situation last



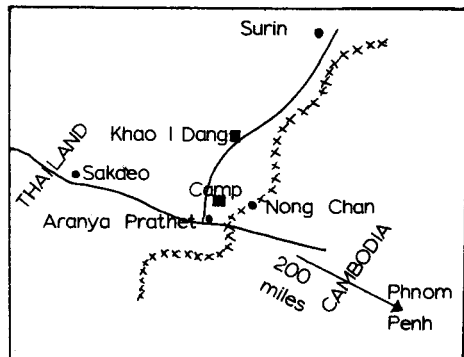
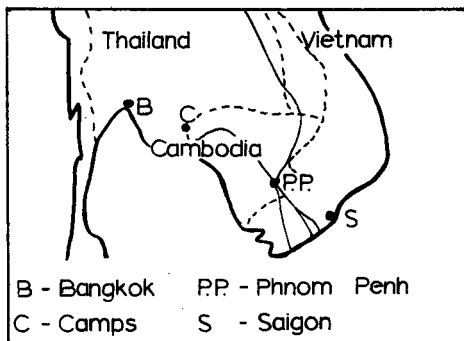
October/November, when thousands of starving refugees were crossing the border daily was a time when, Robert says, emotionally and mentally, he aged ten years. The site at Khao I Dang was just paddy fields and scrubland. Christian Outreach had just two days to start a Supplementary Feeding Centre before the first refugees arrived. As at the other camps, milk is distributed as part of a supplementary nutrition programme.

The announcement of Robert's MBE in the Queen's Birthday Honours List, and the news of his capture by Vietnamese troops, brought Christian Outreach to the forefront of our national daily newspapers. Robert and a French doctor, both working under the auspices of the Red Cross, had been searching the destroyed camp at Nong Chan for wounded people. A Khmer resistance man whom they met drew them a map showing where, over the border, a wounded man lay. It was during the long (and fruitless) search for this man that four Vietnamese soldiers captured the two men, and two journalists.

Robert says that he was not afraid. He had complete assurance that God would see them through. Knowing that news of his disappearance would reach the border, the camps, the office at Bangkok, then family and friends here and all over the world, he realised that a barrage of prayer would be going up on his behalf. In fact, when he realised just how many prayers had been offered for his safety, he was amazed; as he was to learn that the story had not only made the "Bangkok Post", but national dailies in England and elsewhere.

Someone said to him afterwards: "It must have been a harrowing time for you." Back came the reply: "Not at all. It's the first rest I've had for six months!" On the second evening, sitting on plastic sheets, under mosquito nets, waiting for the heavens to open, Robert told me he was quite happy to go to Phnom Penh, "seeing all the sights along the way". Incredibly, he says he wouldn't have missed it for anything. What he found very touching on his release was the reaction of the reporters and cameramen, many of whom he knew quite well. Instead of asking questions and snapping photos, they simply came up to him and shook his hand.

How has he enjoyed his first real holiday for two and a half years? Very much.



Although Robert feels he has the ability to keep going for very long periods, he was ready for a break. Some of the time has been spent in France, visiting families who have been resettled there, and staying with a different Khmer family each night. Now he is looking forward to going back to Thailand.

What will he find on his return? Difficult to say. The situation on the border can change in the space of a week. The latest news is that the supplies being distributed on the Landbridge have been drastically cut down - milk only twice a week, ox-carts coming only once a month.

What opportunities are there to communicate the faith which is the motivation behind Christian Outreach's relief work? Robert is essentially a practical person. He gets on with the job in hand and believes that by letting the questions come from the people, they will then listen more readily to what one has to say. One Thai official questions: "Where are the Buddhist organisations helping our people?"

How has the time spent in Thailand affected

Robert? On a recent camping holiday in Wales, Robert was digging a large hole in which to bury all the rubbish. A friend said to him, "I expect this is different from the sort of camp life you are used to."

"Yes," said Robert, "the last time I dug a hole like this, I was burning bodies."

What can we do? People must remain aware. Pray above all.

"Of course I have changed, but who is to say I wouldn't have changed anyway? I have faith in God, and I know that I shall pass

through to the other side – if not unscathed, at least whole."

Margot Spencer.

FOOTNOTE

We can remain aware by –
keeping up to date with the news;
arranging to obtain Christian Outreach news
and prayer letters;
praying daily for the refugees and for those
who seek to help them.