



## The Fraud Behind The Girl In The Photo

### Hijacking the history of the Vietnam veteran

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Since Veterans Day of 1996, the world has been told of an American who ordered the bombing of the village of Trang Bang, Viet Nam, that resulted in the famous photo of the naked and terrified little girl running toward the Pulitzer Prize-winning photographer.

It is a heart-wrenching photo, told since 1996 with a heart-wrenching story, but if a picture speaks a thousand words, most of the words now associated with this photo are false or misleading. It is a counterfeit commercial parable to generate maximum donations, and relies not on what actually occurred in 1972, but on dramatic fabrications that appear to have been invented specifically to enhance the impact of the Canadian produced documentary, and increase revenues for certain foundations.

The photo is an accurate depiction of about 1/500th of a second of the immediate aftermath of an all-Vietnamese accident in an all-Vietnamese fight in June of 1972, and it was originally reported that way.

Newly manufactured details have changed the perception and altered the reported history of that tragedy. The Canadian documentary crew and the heads of foundations that collect money for themselves created and continue a gross misrepresentation that quickly evolved into a *new memory* and new history of the event. It is a fraud advanced for profit, and is a lie that continues to be published as late as December of 1998.

The Girl In The Photo was accidentally burned by her own countrymen, who were fighting her future countrymen. The only American participants of any nature were the journalists who reported the event and made her famous, and the doctors who saved her life. If left to the care of her countrymen, it is unlikely that the little girl would have lived to market forgiveness to anyone, but Americans saved her, and Americans made her famous enough to forgive us for an accident in which no American participated.

**Forgiveness or Fraud?**

Recent events have brought attention to the fact that many of the *memories* of what happened during the Vietnam war are not true accounts of the events, but are memories that were nurtured, revised, and actually developed long after the war. The very fact that a major news organization recently reported a series of physically impossible events as facts, shows their confidence in the ability to create and manipulate these memories, both private and collective.

Most people over the age of forty-five will remember exactly where they were and what they were doing when they learned of President Kennedy's assassination. How many recall exactly when they first read or heard that Americans, or an American commander, ordered the napalm attack that resulted in the famous photo of a burned and naked little girl running down a road in Vietnam?

The recent story woven around that tragedy has grown to become a myth of major proportions, with many now *remembering* the attack to have always been reported as an American or American ordered attack. But was it?

The photo came to prominence within days of the event, and was etched into the memories of people around the world. The little girl was so cute, her agony was so clear, and the tragedy was so shocking. When the photo was taken and first published, the truth was published with it. The event was an all-Vietnamese accident, at a time when American soldiers had been withdrawn almost completely from participation in ground action.

Peter Arnett, Fox Butterfield, and Christopher Wain were three who independently reported on the incident at the village of Trang Bang, when it happened in 1972. Their news reports showed it to be an accidental bombing by the Vietnamese Air Force, during an all-Vietnamese fight.

The other reports of the time said the same, and film footage taken that day clearly shows a Vietnamese Air Force Skyraider making a highly photogenic low level run, dropping four canisters of napalm with the journalists and South Vietnamese soldiers standing on the road near the village as spectators. The film depicts a casual group, not seeking shelter from either the aircraft or enemy fire, and almost makes it appear that the bomb run was made for the benefit of the film crews. It is strange footage to soldiers who are accustomed to watching air strikes rather furtively from behind cover, more protected from the enemy fire that would have necessitated an air strike, and not while standing unprotected on a road so close to the target. But the attack was real, and the results documented.

How do you remember learning of the tragedy, or of the details? Innumerable millions of people now base their memories of the incident not on what happened or what they read about it then, but on the more recent articles and stories associated with the famous photo. The memory most people have of the incident is a recently manufactured memory that relies on the original imprint and their thoughts about the photo's impression over the years, combined with the new reinforcement to form a reconstructed memory. As we review the sequence of events, it becomes clear how this myth has been manufactured and marketed, and by whom.

The accident on June 8, 1972 was immediately and correctly reported by US and world news organizations. South Vietnamese (ARVN) forces were fighting to push invading Communist soldiers back from portions of a village on the main highway northwest of Saigon. The South Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF) flew sorties in support of their ground forces, and one of the single-seat fighter-bombers of the VNAF 518th Squadron, flown by a South Vietnamese pilot, dropped napalm that missed the clearly marked target. Several ARVN soldiers were killed, along with at least two civilians who were with them, and a cute little Vietnamese girl was horribly burned.

The photograph of that little girl is one of the most recognizable and gripping images of the war. The photograph, and the feeling it evokes, is at the very heart of the new memories of the event.

On Veterans Day weekend of 1996, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, the controversial organization that collects millions of dollars and gives the appearance of ownership and control of the national monument, arranged to have the little burned girl in the photo, now a mother living in Canada, appear at the Wall in Washington, DC. She was in our nation's capital, at the memorial to the American veterans who died in the defense of her homeland, ostensibly *to forgive*.

The stage was set for her emotional appearance by Jan Scruggs, head of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, and prominent in other fund raising *veterans* organizations. In an amazingly inaccurate story under Mr. Scruggs' byline in USA Today, he told how Kim Phuc was burned when an air strike was ordered against a Buddhist pagoda in which her family sought refuge. He told how her brothers were killed instantly. Though a complete fabrication, Scruggs said the pagoda was bombed when it was reported to have been taken by the Communists, and *according to reports on the battle, the order to bomb the pagoda was given by an American*.

When he later read her introduction at the Wall in front of the cameras, he again inserted the dramatic but false details of how she was the victim of an American-ordered air strike, and said that her brothers were killed in the attack. The two youngsters reported killed were not Kim's brothers. Their loss was real enough, but could it be that the claim was made because *brothers* lends a more dramatic effect?

Aside from the grossly inaccurate details, a major problem with what Jan Scruggs related, in both the article and introduction, is that at the time he gave the interview and read the introduction, no American had ever claimed any sort of participation or affiliation with the event. No report at the time said an American ordered the attack, because no American did. That dramatic assertion was invented. His false and dramatic statements were a significant building block of a brand new memory of the napalm attack. He could know of the American who was about to be introduced to the world, only through the Canadian documentary crew that arranged the meeting.

After Jan Scruggs' introduction, and in that remarkable context of time and place, Ms. Kim Phuc read her artfully prepared text. While her script was careful not to actually say that Americans burned her, would anyone suspect that she came to our nation's capital, to the Wall, on Veterans Day, to forgive someone other than an American veteran? The reconstructed memory introduced by Jan Scruggs was formed and reinforced.

She told the world of her forgiveness for the pilot who dropped the bombs that burned her. At the end of her exhibition, a newly ordained Methodist minister came forward to apologize to her, and to accept her forgiveness. Compliant with the intent of the Canadian documentary crew that had Kim under contract, this *spontaneous meeting* was not covered there at the Wall, where other news personnel would have access and be able to report it immediately. There was only a brief meeting near there, with the actual interview conducted later at Kim's hotel.

Reverend John Plummer's role in her forgiveness was confusing and deceptive from the very start, as he passed her a note that said, *I am that man*. Kim offered to forgive the pilot who burned her, and the Methodist minister claimed, *I am that man*. Despite the deceptive wording, his actual claim was to have ordered the attack, not to have actually flown it.

The video documentary was soon released for international broadcast, with Rev. Plummer dramatically detailing how he ordered the air strike that burned Kim, and telling how such a weight was lifted from his shoulders by her forgiveness at their so-called spontaneous encounter. He was magnificent, and his words were very specific that he had consciously, intentionally, and militarily ordered the strike.

His story was that of the stereotypically troubled Vietnam veteran – a divorced alcoholic, a failure at so much in life – recently remarried and called to the ministry, and now saved by the *forgiveness* of *his victim*, with that terrible burden of guilt lifted from his overburdened shoulders. That stereotype fit what Americans have come to expect to hear about Vietnam veterans.

Few realized that the meeting was not spontaneous, but had been planned with the documentary crew. No one linked the preparation of the media and the crowd by Jan Scruggs, as setting the stage for the *miracle* and the new memories to follow. The real miracle may have been that so many people bought into the story, for almost as soon as Jan Scruggs told the world that the bombing was ordered by an American, that very American appeared from the anonymity of the crowd.

Perhaps it was the media-driven, media-induced *collective Vietnam guilt* that made the story so acceptable. Most of those who became aware of the *miracle at the Wall* ignored the fact that ex-Captain Plummer's claim to have ordered the strike was the very first and only indication of any American participation whatsoever, since the event had occurred almost a quarter century before.

Few understood the workings of military staffs and inter-service coordination at that level, and most importantly, memories of the events of 1972 have dimmed and been distorted by decades of being exposed to distorted reporting.

In 1972, Americans were acutely aware of the *Vietnamization* of the war, when more and more of our soldiers came home as their units were withdrawn. That memory has faded over the years of revisionist history, to the point that many people even believe that American forces were fighting in Vietnam as Saigon fell in April of 1975. The truth is that all US combat forces left Vietnam by March of 1973, more than two years before the Communists launched the invasion that gained them the country.

Why would Ms. Kim Phuc be brought to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, to the Wall, on Veterans Day, and why would she be presented to the world as a victim of an American-ordered attack? Ask the leaders of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund and The Kim Foundation. Since some of the leaders were on both foundations, it simplifies the process.

In early 1997 the Associated Press picked up the minister's story, *From Guilt to Grace*, as did the Washington Post, and from there it was repeated in newspapers around the country and around the world. Those articles helped to completely change the nature and the truth of the event.

An excellent example of the magnitude of the change is how Charles Colson, of Watergate and Prison Ministries fame, was influenced by the Scruggs-revised memory. In early 1997 he wrote about a morning when he was on the White House Staff in 1972. He recalled entering the Presidential limousine to see that photo and read the gut-wrenching headlines of the American-ordered air strike that burned the little girl.

But the headlines in 1972 did not say that. They reflected an all-Vietnamese accident of war. When questioned about the timing he had his staff conduct

an investigation, and the results revealed that Rev. Plummer's story was false. Mr. Colson's recollection had been affected by the commercial parable.

Mr. Colson's *new memory* of the event was based on years of being aware of and impacted by the photo, combined with articles he had recently read about Kim forgiving the American commander who ordered the bombing. His new memory combined the impact of the original photo with the details of American participation introduced by the Canadian documentary, Jan Scruggs and Rev. Plummer. Millions upon millions of people were similarly affected by the mass exposure of this revised history.

Rev. Plummer appeared in several television interviews, including ABC's Nightline. He made at least 32 public speaking appearances over the course of the next year, starting and flourishing his *ministry of forgiveness*. In less than a year after his *Miracle at the Wall* this new minister addressed more people than he had in his entire life to that point, and appeared to be on the fast track within his church hierarchy.

He participated in President Clinton's second Inaugural Parade, wearing a cavalry Stetson and white scarf, and waving to the crowd from a Vietnam-era helicopter provided and towed by other Vietnam veterans. He became a minor celebrity. An article was published under his byline in Guideposts Magazine, and he appeared in Biography with his quote, *I can still hear the screams of the children*.

He told his friends that Hallmark was buying the rights to the movie. He gushed about the television hosts who wanted him to appear, and the many magazine and newspaper articles. He told them there were four books in progress. He complained to a friend that the advance offered by a publishing company for a book on the story of his life was too small to allow him to take a sabbatical from his church duties.

He worked to become a legend and a celebrity, as it appeared that the money would soon flow in. His exaggerations were not limited to his claims of ordering the napalm attack. He prepared a biography saying he retired with the rank of Lieutenant Colonel, a promotion not recorded in his official military record, and of which the US Army appears to be completely unaware.

Scores of publications echoed the story about his *Miracle at the Wall*. More accurately, they echoed his stories, for the details of his story evolved a bit in each article, even the ones he wrote himself.

Rev. Plummer's claim of having direct control of a flight of warplanes belonging to a foreign government, with the changes in the details, caught the attention of veterans with experience in the type of activities the minister claimed. They saw that his story lacked credibility, was overly dramatic, and had details that simply could not be true. Investigation has subsequently shown that more than literary license was employed.

Those familiar with how Army and Air Force staffs worked and interacted, especially during that 1972 period of *Vietnamization*, knew that his explanations not only conflicted with each other, but bordered on being physically impossible, and were simply not the way things were done.

An informal investigation began and on November 1, 1997, the Commanding General of the minister's unit in Vietnam was interviewed. Lieutenant General (Retired) James Hollingsworth was the commander of Third Regional Assistance Command (TRAC), the advisor unit to which then-Captain Plummer was assigned. General Hollingsworth stated, in no

uncertain terms, that even he could not have done what the minister, a low-level staff officer, claimed to have done.

The Operations Officer of the unit was located. Major General (Retired) Niles Fulwyler, a colonel when he was the TRAC G-3, fully and independently confirmed the statements of his former commander. Despite the retired generals' statements, Rev. Plummer continued his various claims. His *From Guilt to Grace* theme was advanced and the 1997 Veterans Day weekend media feeding frenzy began again.

Ms. Kim Phuc's insertion into Veterans Day of 1997 came not again at the Wall, but as UNESCO press releases announced her appointment as a Goodwill Ambassador. Her appointment was based on the forgiveness she offered for her terrible injuries and loss, caused by the American commander who ordered the air strike that burned her.

The UNESCO announcement could have come at any time of the year, but by timing it for Veterans Day weekend in the United States, they were able to once more link Kim Phuc with her forgiveness of the American commander who ordered the attack, and thereby to the American people.

The UNESCO press releases, while not accurate, were relatively mild in their inclusion of the minister, but whatever impact the releases may have lacked was added by the greatly embellished versions of many of the newspapers printing them. The articles often added more dramatic details that seemed to fit. *Fire rained down on her village.* was a popular phrase, as was *her village came under intense aerial bombardment.* One newspaper dipped so far into fantasy as to say that nerve gas was used on Kim's village of Trang Bang that day. That particular theme was later repeated in another change of history by CNN.

A tremendously popular detail initially inserted by Jan Scruggs in his USA Today article, was how the Buddhist pagoda in which Kim and her family sought refuge was targeted and hit by the bombs. This claim is not even accurate as to the religion of the pagoda, for it, like Kim at the time, was of the Cao Dai faith. Far more important to the truth of the story, the pagoda was neither targeted nor hit. The bombing of the pagoda was simply an invention for the sake of dramatic emphasis. The pagoda was not targeted, and it was not hit.

Could it be that bombing children within the sanctity of a religious structure is simply far more dramatic than a tragic accident on the outskirts of the village, that killed soldiers and civilians alike? Or could it be that those who tell this story want to imply that our veterans and our country routinely committed acts of that nature?

The essential ingredient was that a former US Army officer had claimed to order the attack. That *admission* was all that was needed to fully credit American forces with the incident, and with the assertion that it was a conscious act to bomb the pagoda, the Americans could be cast as true villains.

The Arts & Entertainment Channel aired the previously broadcast Canadian-produced documentary and sold it worldwide, with the advertisements and narrator stating they would show *the American commander who ordered* the bombing. Since he was now publicized as the commander instead of a low-ranking staff officer, some news reports *corrected* his rank to correspond with his new status and, in those articles Rev. Plummer became a colonel.

After the minister's exaggerated claims continued to be embellished on Veterans Day weekend of 1997, he lost much of his support within the



veteran community. The claims and headlines had simply become too incredible. It no longer appeared to be a personal cleansing of his conscience, but an obvious distortion and grasp for celebrity.

Contact information was provided to The Baltimore Sun, and an investigative reporter was assigned to research the minister's claims. Tom Bowman was the first person in the news media to actually interview sources other than the person making the claims, and he was surprised at what he discovered. When he left Rev. Plummer's church after their interview, he felt sympathy for a man who had been caught up in his own celebrity, and was convinced that the minister would no longer advance his claims.

The front page headline on the Sunday, December 14, 1997 edition of The Baltimore Sun read, *Veteran's admission to napalm victim a lie*. Stung by Bowman's scoop, the Associated Press and The Washington Post had to take another look at their previously glowing stories about the minister and *his victim*. In stark contrast to their April articles about his *miracle*, their subsequent December articles told how Rev. Plummer admitted that he had embellished, overstated, and misstated his role.

Shortly after those stories appeared in newspapers around the country, Rev. Plummer tried to recover his story by changing one word. Emboldened by the support of his church superiors and foundation contacts, he changed his stance to one quite different from his admission to the reporters in December. He now said that he did not order, but instead coordinated, and that his use of that verb was simply *incautious*. He said he never meant that he ordered the attack *in the military sense*. His defense was posted on the web site of the Virginia Conference of the United Methodist Church.

Rev. Plummer's position, posted on the church's web site the month after multiple independent investigations of their minister's claims showed the claims to be false, also said that *conscientious media personnel and military historians have discounted the claims against me*. The church ignored requests for them to name a single source to support that, for the truth is just the opposite. After actually investigating, the same reporters who had originally supported and praised Rev. Plummer's *miracle* reported that it was not true. For more than eight months the VAUMC refused to even respond to requests for information about how they arrived at their statements.

Even worse, Rev. Plummer's Bishop and District Superintendent defended their subordinate's use of the story, stating that he had responded with great restraint to his *detractors*, and that he was *responsibly fulfilling his role as an ordained full member of the Virginia Conference of the United Methodist Church*

Bishop Pennel ignored inquiries from even his own church members. A member voted *Man Of The Year* in one of the Conference's local churches attempted to communicate his concern about the minister's claims and the Church's defense of them, but the Bishop would not even meet with him. He sent an administrator to talk with the man, and the defense remained on the VAUMC web site for eight months, with the VAUMC saying the entire story was only a personal story about their minister.

Untouched by the truth, they portrayed the nature of their minister's fabrications to be *an important story about himself* that maligned no one by claiming to have caused an event that changed a Vietnamese accident of war to a pre-considered American-ordered atrocity. They twisted their stated perception of the situation to be that their minister was being maligned, and ignored what the false claims said and implied about the men who served honorably.

Their actions beg the question, *If their subordinate is on the fast track because of his celebrity, do the superiors ride his coat tails in advancement?* There is no question about these officials' disdain for American veterans.

Ironically, if Rev. Plummer had adopted his *coordinated* claim before the surge of publicity during the preceding Veterans Day when he was proclaimed the commander who ordered the bombing, it would have stopped the investigation that no one wanted.

Since he held fast to his claims, the investigation had continued, and by the time he was ready to concede that he did not actually order the strike, still more members of his former chain of command and other men involved had been located. It no longer appeared that the minister had simply embellished, misstated, and over-dramatized. It became clear that he had actually invented every detail of his participation.

Accuracy In Media, following the story for some time, released a report in March 1998, *Energetic Vet Exposes Big Vietnam Lie*. Accuracy In Media called the minister's claims *despicable*.

When contacted after Veterans Day, UNESCO removed the references to Rev. Plummer from its press releases. After all, in the year since coming forward at the Wall, the personable and well-spoken minister with the kind, mellow voice and heart wrenching guilt had all but replaced Kim as the central figure in their story.

The reason for Rev. Plummer's continued claims became clear as he once again appeared in a video production, *The Wall That Heals*. This video, shot in late 1997 and released in 1998, appears intended to solicit funds for Jan Scruggs' Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund. In this video Rev. Plummer stood before the names of the dead veterans engraved on the Wall and with the voice and demeanor of a trusted Methodist minister said once again, *In 1972, I ordered an air strike*. He did not say that he coordinated the strike, or participated in some way, but that he ordered the strike.

When contacted, the producers agreed to remove his claims from the video, and a new version of the tape was produced. In one version he was removed, but the version with his lie included was also sold.

At about the time of the release of *The Wall That Heals* video, Rev. Plummer was reinserted into UNESCO press releases. Why was he put back into the story, when the men who were there flatly disputed his role? Why was his participation presented as fact, when the independent news investigations all agreed that he had, at the very least, misrepresented what he did?

It certainly appears to have been done to increase contributions. Gratitude for Kim's forgiveness seems to be far greater when there is a haunted *American commander* to express his guilt and accept her forgiveness, for himself and by extension, for his country.

The Kim Foundation is a Chicago-based organization founded in November 1997, a year after the momentous *miracle at the Wall*, to accept donations for Kim Phuc. Though they have an exclusive address, no information about their finances is made available.

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund is an organization that has collected multi-millions of dollars. Many complaints have been made regarding their fund raising practices, and many veterans have expressed concern that the true goals of the VVMF are to perpetuate itself and enrich its leaders.



Some of the most vicious attacks against the men who tracked down the facts about Rev. Plummer's claims, have come from people with VVMF affiliations. From the support shown by the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, it would appear that Kim Phuc is one of their very favorite Vietnam veterans.

Where there is guilt, and gratitude for the forgiveness of that guilt, the contributions are undoubtedly increased. This formula was confirmed by one of the producers of the Canadian documentary who stated in 1997, that every time the story of Kim Phuc and Rev. Plummer is broadcast, *the contributions pour in*.

If an American is not included in Kim's story, Americans still feel sympathetic, but without Rev. Plummer to accept responsibility for them and their country, the collective feeling of *forgiveness* for the act is vague. Without the *feel good* message of Kim forgiving *the American commander* who caused her pain, contributions are probably diminished, but figures are not provided.

In the spring of 1998 Jan Scruggs, apparently representing both the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund and The Kim Foundation, appears to have accompanied Kim Phuc to a Senate reception. Did anyone bother to mention to the Senators that Kim was burned by her own countrymen, fighting her future countrymen, without American participation?

Also in the spring of 1998, the investigation of Rev. Plummer's claims revealed a surprising and conclusive new twist. There had been no American advisor with the South Vietnamese forces at Trang Bang when Kim Phuc was burned.

General Hollingsworth had stated on November 1, 1997, that his Third Regional Assistance Command (TRAC) was not even involved in that fight, and *had nothing to do with the fighting at Trang Bang* in June of 1972. At the time no one suspected the minister of actually manufacturing the story, only embellishing it, so the general's statement was taken figuratively. As more was learned, it was clarified and confirmed to have been a literal statement. The minister's unit was not involved in that fighting, and there was no American advisor there.

A crucial portion of the minister's story includes details of radio conversations with the American advisor at the scene of the fighting. These 82-kilometer transmissions were incredible because of the technical difficulty of short-range line-of-sight FM radio communications alone, but during that stage of the war, Vietnamization was in full effect. A terrible battle was raging past its second month at An Loc. The minister's entire chain of command has stated that the American advisors had been pulled from the less strategic areas to replace advisors lost at An Loc. There was no American advisor at Trang Bang to make those radio calls that Rev. Plummer describes so vividly and dramatically.

The pilot who actually dropped the bombs was located. A Vietnamese now living in the US, he was surprised that an American claimed participation in the tragic accident that remains a source of embarrassment to him.

Pulitzer Prize-winning photographer Nick Ut said there were no American soldiers or advisors at the battle. His boss was Richard Pyle, Associated Press Bureau Chief for Vietnam. Interviewed by telephone in March of 1998, he said there were no American advisors at Trang Bang during that fighting, and *there wasn't an American advisor north of Cu Chi*. Cu Chi is far to the southeast of Trang Bang, between that village and Saigon. Other articles from 1972 showed no American participation, even with the ARVN command group that called for and directed the strike.

In May of 1998, Lieutenant Colonel (Retired) Mario Burdick was located. As the G-3 Air (Air Operations Officer) when Captain Plummer was the Assistant G-3 Air, then-Major Burdick was Captain Plummer's direct boss and his first line supervisor on the staff of US Army advisors. LTC Burdick took two months to review his documentation, and wrote a definitive report on what could and could not have happened. He wrote of his fond memories of John Plummer, but showed how the man could not possibly have done what he claimed.

Despite the testimony and reports of Rev. Plummer's entire living chain of command, the men who watched the attack, the men who reported the attack, and the man who actually made the attack, Rev. Plummer and his friends desperately held to his *responsibility* for the attack. The minister and his supporters, who had already discounted the statements of the retired generals and the others, ignored the report of his direct supervisor.

Many of his supporters claimed that Rev. Plummer had never actually said he had ordered the attack, and that *his words have been changed by the media*. His own lips can be seen and heard to make that claim on at least two television interviews and the videotape released in 1998. Rev. Plummer himself says he did not write the Guideposts article, although it has his byline, and is very specific in discussing how he ordered the attack.

One can only assume that for a man safe in a bunker 50 miles from the fighting, literary license was employed in the bold headline in Biography, *I can still hear the screams of the children*.

Another Methodist minister, concerned with service to God instead of his own celebrity, conducted his own investigation. After researching the event, his question for Rev. Plummer and Bishop Pennel was how, when men of God had investigated and found conclusive, documented, and overwhelming evidence of a *not-guilty verdict*, a minister could still cling to an impossible guilt that brought pain and dishonor to other veterans and his country?

In November of 1998 the Third Regional Assistance Command logs were declassified and obtained. These 26 year-old documents show the truth of the statements of all the officers for whom Rev. Plummer worked.

The truth, recorded and classified in 1972, was that TRAC only learned of the attack from an Armed Forces Vietnam newscast. They had to investigate the next day through ARVN channels, because they had no advisor assigned to the Trang Bang area. The air strike had been personally and directly coordinated by the 25th ARVN Division Commander, with no American participation.

Rev. Plummer and his supporters now base their defense on two issues. The first is that for his service on the TRAC staff Captain Plummer, like most junior officers of his grade during that period of the war, was awarded the Bronze Star for Service. Rev. Plummer claims that the citation for this award *proves* he did what he said. The second defense is that a former enlisted soldier in another staff section of TRAC, says he believes Rev. Plummer probably did what he claims.

Without denigrating the service award of any veteran, Rev. Plummer included, it is important to understand how a service award was actually created during wartime. Not to be confused with a Bronze Star for Valor, a Bronze Star for Service does not require any witness statements. Valor awards require supporting witness statements, and are normally prepared on a completely individual basis. Service awards through that level are essentially *roster* type awards, usually produced as a clerical function from *boiler plate* documents for the particular duty position, and given to those

who perform their duties to certain standards. That does not diminish the award in any way, it is simply an administrative fact about how such awards are made to happen.

The wording of the citation, a copy of which was provided by Captain Plummer to all of the investigating reporters, says Captain Plummer assisted in the coordination of a tremendous number of air strikes and support activities. *Assisted in*, as opposed to *coordinated*, is a militarily significant difference in this context.

Without questioning the validity of his award, it was given for a period lasting months. While it is not reasonable to say that he did everything listed on the award every day, for the sake of his claims let us assume that to be the case, and view his citation in the most favorable possible light.

Even if Rev. Plummer did exactly what he interprets the award to say, every single day, the fact remains that statements from his superiors and the declassified logs prove that his unit did not participate in the fighting at Trang Bang. His entire chain of command says the unit was not involved, and all sources on the scene say no Americans were there. Without the American advisor to call him as his story relates, and with his unit not even involved in the fighting in that area, how can his citation support his claims? He was not a free agent. He could not participate in an action in which his unit did not participate. He did not do what he claimed.

The second leg of the minister's final defense is that a former soldier in another staff section was located during the research. This soldier, of very low rank at the time, admits he did not see, does not know about, and was completely unaware of what happened at Trang Bang. He also admits he was not in Captain Plummer's staff section at the time, and said he was unaware of Rev. Plummer's claims about the event until contacted in 1998.

He says he thinks Rev. Plummer probably did what he claims, even though he admits that the details are *fuzzy*, and that he is *uncomfortable* with the radio call portion. Other than the fact that he liked Captain Plummer, that is the extent of his support.

When this former soldier's *support* was received in May 1998, Rev. Plummer sent it to various news organizations, to *prove* his claims. Especially when viewed in its full context, then compared to the statements of all the others on the staff, Rev. Plummer's direct supervisor, and the commander of the unit, this last element of support falls apart. The reporters and writers who received this attempt at a fresh start, some of whom had originally written very flattering articles about Rev. Plummer, obviously felt it lacked credibility and relevance.

Some people continue to support Rev. Plummer's claims, despite all evidence to the contrary and despite his admission that he misstated his role, simply because he is a minister of the Methodist Church.

Others support Rev. Plummer's claims because his portrayal of the stereotypically plagued Vietnam veteran confirms what they want or have been led to believe about Vietnam veterans. To them, Vietnam veterans are maladjusted and guilt-ridden, personified by men like Rev. Plummer and the multitude of non-veterans who parade about in 1980s-issue camouflage.

Still others support Rev. Plummer's story because his claims support what they have long said about Vietnam veterans. His guilt justifies their opposition to the war and the history they have distorted to justify that opposition.

And finally, there are those who support Rev. Plummer's claims because they make their living, they derive their livelihood, from *representing* the Vietnam veteran. To many of these, the truth is most often an unwelcome intruder, and Rev. John Plummer is among the best of what they have to offer.

No matter how one feels about forgiveness and what should be done to earn it, one fact is certain: There was no American participation in the bombing of Kim Phuc. It was an all-Vietnamese event that was reported that way when it happened in 1972. It is no less tragic because of the fact that her injuries were caused by a sorrowful accident by her very own countrymen, but the incident pales in comparison to the acts of terror that the Communists committed as policy.

Since her campaign of forgiveness started, the Communist government that used terror as its routine policy during that war has allowed Kim's parents to leave Vietnam to live with her in Canada. Could it be mere coincidence that in all of this *former* Communist propaganda tool's speeches of forgiveness, the Communists appear to be the only ones who did nothing for which they need to be forgiven?

If the goal of Kim Phuc's recent involvement is to maximize contributions and donations, she will continue to allow the impression that Americans were responsible for her injuries, and continue to be deceptive in her presentations.

She herself has no need to actually say that Americans bombed her or ordered her bombed. She simply avoids that part herself, and allows the impression created by the Canadian-produced documentary and Jan Scruggs' article and introduction to continue, as she has done for years. The narrators and advertisements tell the lie for her, so that it does not need to come from her own lips. Her failure to correct those lies results in articles such as The Montreal Gazette's December 1998 article about her, saying she was burned in an American-ordered attack.

If Kim is serious about forgiveness, instead of going to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and publicly forgiving an American who had nothing to do with the event until a quarter century after it happened, perhaps she should forgive the pilot, formerly of the 518th Squadron of the Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF). His was the hand that flew and controlled that Vietnamese aircraft, and he is certainly deserving of forgiveness for a simple but tragic mistake as he risked his life to try to save Kim's village from the invaders.

Major Ron Timberlake won the silver star while serving as a helicopter pilot in Vietnam. He died as a result of injuries suffered in a motorcycle accident on May 5, 1999. See [Helivets](#) for more details about Ron's distinguished career.