

VERNE CHANEY, M.D.

Man of a Thousand Places

By Jeff Blumenfeld

It was a dangerous mission, as dangerous as military service gets. During the Korean War, medical corpsmen were among the bravest. When an injured soldier frantically yelled "Medic!" it was a corpsman who came forward with a trauma kit, splints, i.v. fluid, and a stretcher. Verne Chaney was one such man, a graduate of the Virginia Military Institute.

One day after the Korean War erupted on June 25, 1950, Chaney, a 27-year-old World War II veteran from Kansas City, Missouri, an Eagle Scout, the son of a World War I first sergeant who served with Harry S. Truman, resigned as a resident in surgery at Johns Hopkins Hospital to volunteer with the Army Medical Corps.

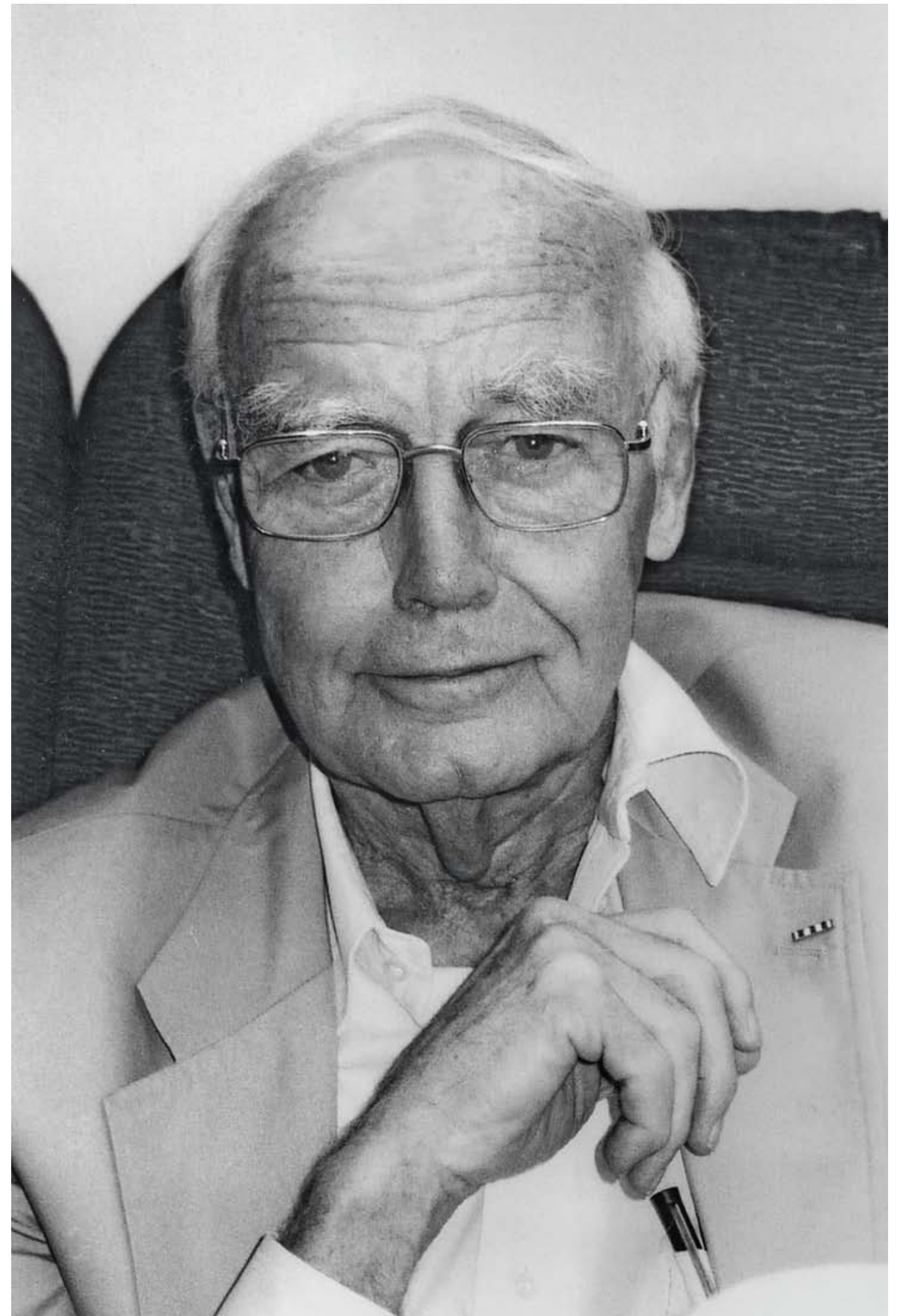
He was assigned to the 8076 Mobile Army Surgical Hospital (M.A.S.H.) in Korea for five months. Chaney then volunteered for as-

signment to a battalion aid station with the 23rd Infantry Regiment, 2nd Infantry Division as a battalion surgeon.

During the month-long battle for Heartbreak Ridge in 1951, Captain Chaney was compelled to inch through an active minefield to reach three medics wounded by an underground mine. Carefully, meticulously, Chaney crawled through the mines, probing his way with a bayonet, leaving behind a trail of bandages for the Republic of Korea (ROK) stretcher-bearer to follow. Suddenly the South Korean stepped outside the line – a deadly mistake. When a booby-trapped North Korean body suddenly exploded, the ROK serviceman lost a leg and Chaney was hit by shrapnel. While Chaney's injury was not life threatening, he was evacuated to a M.A.S.H. hospital where he recuperated before returning to duty.

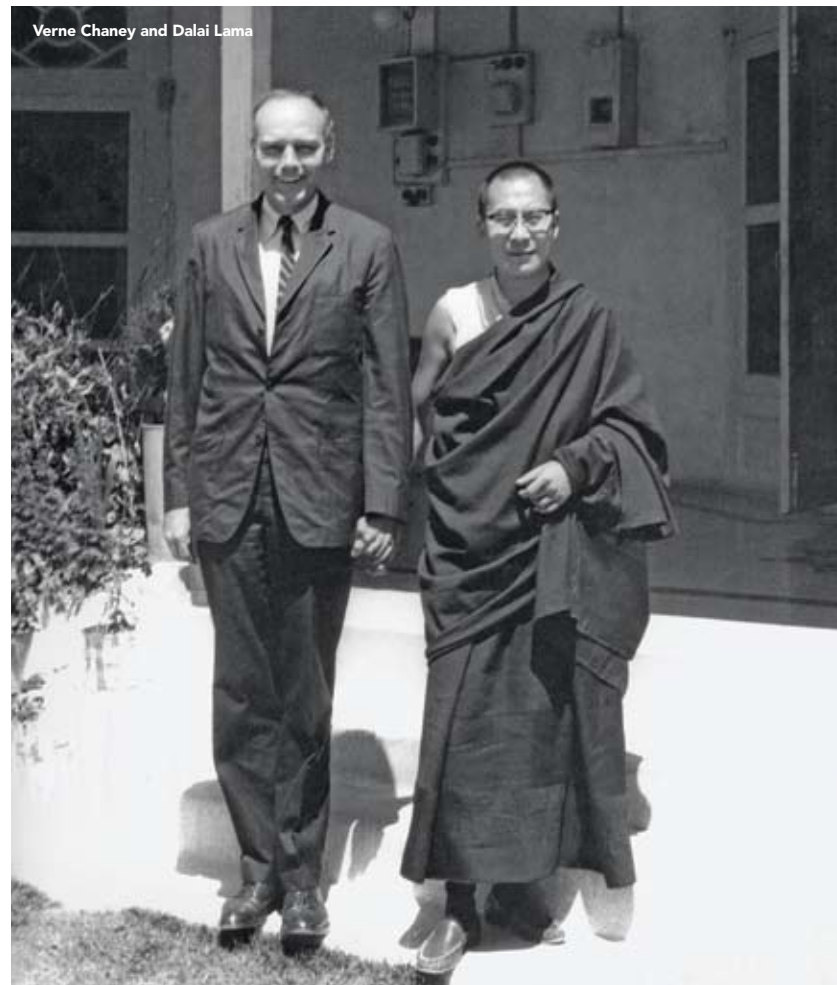


Albert Schweitzer and Verne Chaney





Verne Chaney with Tony Bennett & Zero Mostel



Verne Chaney and Dalai Lama

Chaney considers his three years working as a medical corpsman in Korea, and at a frostbite clinic in Japan, his finest hours. He would go on to receive a Silver Star for Gallantry, the Bronze Star for Valor, the Purple Heart and French Croix de Guerre, becoming one of the highest decorated doctors in the Korean War.

His time on the battlefields of Korea exposed the young doctor to incredible pain and suffering, and solidified his resolve to eventually devote his life to helping people in need.

Today, wartime medals hang framed in a modest two bedroom Upper East Side Manhattan apartment where Chaney, now 92, and his wife Harriett of eight years, live amidst a lifetime of artifacts attesting to an extraordinary career leading Dooley Intermed International, a New York-based non-profit founded by Chaney, dedicated to providing crucial assistance to those who lie beyond the reach of traditional healthcare.

The teak furniture with ivory inlays, the antique opium weights and scales, dancing women sculptures from Laos and Thailand, a carved, almost life-sized baby elephant, framed Angkor Wat temple rubbings – all recall a time when Chaney was lauded by politicians, holy men and Hollywood stars alike.

One file folder contains a lock of famed African medical missionary Albert Schweitzer's hair. There's a 1964 photo showing Schweitzer in Africa, wearing his trademark bowtie, white shirt and khakis, gazing up at Chaney, tall and lean, sporting a porkpie straw hat, pocket protector, and looking like an extra from the TV show "Mad Men."

He remembers one day flicking a fly off Dr. Schweitzer's arm.

"Don't do that. It's my fly," he was admonished by the Nobel Prize-winning physician, who believed in the sanctity of all life, no matter how small. Schweitzer would later agree to become an honorary chairman of Dooley Intermed's National Advisory Council.

Going Hollywood

Another image shows a young Chaney holding hands with His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama, whom he met through the world famous author, explorer and broadcaster Lowell Thomas.

"You don't grab hold of the Dalai Lama's hand, he holds yours," Chaney said while showing the photo to a visitor.

There are publicity stills taken with Danny Kaye, Tony Bennett and Shirley MacLaine – Hollywood stars enlisted, often shamelessly, to help raise needed funds.

The singer Peggy Lee was so enamored with Chaney and his work, that she accepted the title of national chairman of the foundation. She would often write to potential donors, even calling them directly.

"You'd get a call from Peggy Lee – who's going to turn down a call like that? She was a marvelous door opener," Chaney remembers.

Following discharge from the Army, and once completing a residency in thoracic surgery at the University of North Carolina Memorial Hospital in Chapel Hill, Chaney volunteered in 1956 to work as Chief of Surgery at Hospital Albert Schweitzer in Haiti. For his humanitarian efforts, he was awarded a commendation by the State Department and by the U.S. Haitian Ambassador.

After 15 months, he returned from Haiti and entered into private practice in Monterey, Calif. Within two years he had four offices and was so busy, he added a partner.

His volunteer work gained further meaning in the summer of 1960 when he received a call from Dr. Thomas A. Dooley III, the "jungle doctor" himself, a charismatic medical missionary from a comfortable St. Louis suburb who in the 1950s captivated the American public with his aid to the people of Asia. During the Eisenhower years, Dooley's remote medicine missions – 17 in all – were established in impoverished areas of 14 Asian countries using millions of dollars donated by those he had inspired.

Chaney recalls, "Dooley was a former ship's doctor in the U.S. Navy in the 1950s serving in Vietnam and was appalled by the plight of refugees of the First Indochina War (1946-50) who had no medical



Dr. Tom Dooley and Dr. Verne Chaney

care. He thought he could do something about it and believed the brotherhood of man transcends the sovereignty of nations.

"He was good looking, charismatic and loved publicity – he loved being on the radio. Dooley knew that positive publicity could well lead to private, corporate and government support," Chaney recalls.

"This is Your Life"

In November 1959, Dooley was particularly thrilled to be on Ralph Edwards' popular television show, "This is Your Life."

Tragically, as Dooley was being celebrated on national television, he was dying of a cancer that claimed his life in January 1961 at the age of 34.

With the permission of Dooley's mother, which she granted immediately, Chaney gave up his lucrative practice to establish the Thomas A. Dooley Foundation in San Francisco in September 1961, named in honor of the man the media called, "The Splendid American," the Laotian people called "Dr. America," and some considered a saint.

Under the aegis of the Dooley Foundation – Intermed International, medical assistance projects continued in Cambodia, Hong Kong, Laos, Vietnam and with Tibetan refugees in northern India.

"Dooley's Dollies"

In need of volunteers to assist overseas, Chaney turned to a Pan Am employee he was dating at the time, a woman who wanted to donate her time and energy to Dooley Intermed. Chaney reasoned that stewardesses, as they were called at the time, were medically trained, traveled the world anyway, and perhaps could receive the necessary time off. He unabashedly approached Juan Trippe, founder of Pan American World Airways, and secured his agreement that any employee sufficiently interested in supporting Chaney's humanitarian projects would receive an airline ticket and time off. It would be without pay, but at no loss to seniority.

Trippe's staff was aghast. "They told him they were running an airline, not a charity," Chaney recalls.

International Stewardess News began calling them "Dooley's Dollies." Adds Chaney, "It was a very important program during our early years. Over 200 stewardesses took part, and not just from Pan Am. Twenty-five other airlines joined in. Besides helping the needy, it created positive public relations for Dooley Intermed."

Making His Mark

Chaney's innovative fieldwork is widely heralded, such as a solar powered refrigerator he developed for carrying perishable vaccines over long mountain passes.

"We put it together with solar cells hooked to a battery which powered the refrigerator. It was heavy, not very practical, but it was effective in keeping vaccines cool in the field," he said.

Chaney also dressed his staff in distinguished yellow uniforms instead of the usual white. His "Goats For Kids" program solicited contributions to buy goats for undernourished children in Africa.

He created medical clinics out of houseboats – nicknamed "showboats" – that traveled the rivers of southeast Asia packed to the gunwales with medical supplies, decorated with flags and banners, and blasting recorded music to help attract patients – "Tijuana Brass" was a favorite. The floating clinics had a certain theatrical flair, featuring movies, even puppet shows for children. Each houseboat was named after a Disney character. The Laotians, first afraid, grew to love the boat they called "Mikka Moush."

Dooley Intermed Today

The work of Dooley Intermed International continues today, with multiple medical projects focused primarily in Nepal, Nicaragua and Thailand. Many outreach projects cost a modest \$25,000, yet benefit hundreds and even thousands of impoverished villagers in the forgotten corners of the world. Recently Dooley was involved in helping earthquake victims in Nepal recover from the worse earthquake to hit that landlocked country in 80 years.

These days, Verne Chaney spends his time mostly in his apartment, and remains in touch with his adult sons Christopher and Steven. His body – tormented by land mines, crushed by a 1993 tornado in Petersburg, Va., that almost took his life – is no longer strong enough to travel beyond visiting his wife's suburban home in New Jersey and the occasional American Ballet Theatre performance.

Albert Schweitzer once said, "No man is ever completely and permanently a stranger to his fellow-man. Man belongs to man. Man has claims on man."

Such was the guiding principle of Tom Dooley, and it lives on today thanks to the inspiring leadership and service of Verne Chaney, a selfless humanitarian who for over five decades has been passionately driven by the belief: "the war against hunger, disease and ignorance is unending, and must be fought by men and women united by a consciousness of the brotherhood of man." □

For more information about Dooley Intermed, log onto www.dooleyintermed.org.

About the Author: Jeff Blumenfeld, a frequent contributor to Venu Magazine, is editor of ExpeditionNews.com, and author of an adventure sponsorship book titled, Get Sponsored: A Funding Guide for Explorers, Adventurers, and Would-Be World Travelers (Skyhorse Publishing, 2014).