

Peace Corps/Chile: ED Butler 1962-64

Married, two daughters, four grandchildren, Democrat, foreign aid mercenary, golfer, mystic and Flamenco dancer. That's me, except for the last two items which have yet to be realized. Notre Dame certainly had something to do with all this, but the Peace Corps was my real epiphany. It led to my marriage to a Chilean, a career in international development and residence in ten Latin American and African countries. Now I am mostly retired, living part time in the States and part time in Chile.

At Notre Dame, I first learned what I didn't want to do in life. I found no satisfaction in engineering during my first year and felt the same about business which I took up in my second year. Running out of career choices, I left the University and entered the Maryknoll College Seminary near Chicago. My Catholicism had helped me survive adolescence; I felt it might help sort out the rest of my life. And it did. At the seminary, I soon discovered the shakiness of my religious beliefs and my reluctance to be a bystander in the sexual revolution of the Sixties. These doubts aside, I liked the camaraderie of the Seminary and the seriousness of its purpose. Ultimately the sound advice of my priest advisor prevailed. He gently led me to the exit door, assuring me that there were other outlets for my idealism and urge to live in far off places.

Free again, I went back home and undertook a series of volunteer and paid social service jobs. Within a year, I re-enrolled at Notre Dame, this time in the social sciences and with a career purpose in mind. A campus organization, which evolved later into the ND Center for Social Concerns, was a very important part of my remaining years at ND. The work with migrant families and getting more involved in the social issues of the day made those last two years fly by.

The Telegram

Immediately after graduation in 1962, I went to Tacambaro, Mexico under ND sponsorship. Soon I was building the crooked but well-intentioned walls of our adopted school. But before I had a chance to truly love tortillas for breakfast, the village messenger appeared at the school site waving a telegram. It was for me, and entirely unexpected. The message was from the University of Notre Dame and it urged, practically commanded, me to join the Peace Corps. Father Hesburgh, it seemed, wanted me to do this.

I was excited and honored. Not only would this be an adventure but it might also remedy my somewhat uncomfortable relationship with the Notre Dame Administration. In my senior year (1962), I was summoned to the President's imposing office and reprimanded for organizing an anti-war protest against a Military Mass being held on campus. They suspended me from classes temporarily, and threatened to toss me out to the heathen, protesting mobs of UC/Berkeley.

With this history, it wasn't clear to me why Notre Dame wanted me in the Peace Corps. The offer was quite irregular. The Peace Corps was a new initiative of President Kennedy and was supposed to recruit America's smartest and fittest young adults. Perhaps Notre Dame thought that I had turned the corner, was doing penance in Mexico and should be rewarded. Whatever their motives, I asked no questions and accepted the offer on faith, like we were supposed to do at Notre Dame. I later learned that Fr. Hesburgh was deeply involved with the Kennedy Administration in setting-up the new Peace Corps Program. ND led a consortium of Mid-western universities who were to mount a program in Chile. The President of Notre Dame wanted to make sure that graduates of his university were well represented. In his mind, a degree from Notre Dame was a sufficient qualification for service anywhere and in any field. They told me that the

application process, normally quite rigorous, was a mere formality. And it was. I was accepted within two weeks.

Getting Started in Chile

We arrived in Chile's Capital City ready for sacrifice and challenge, leaving behind the comforts of our spoiled and indulgent homeland. But Santiago didn't know that. There was more training, almost indoctrination, into the moral and economic underpinnings of TECHO, the organization for whom we were to work. Upper-middle class professionals, not the poor, were our counterparts. For three weeks, we went to classes and lived in the leafy, manicured suburbs of Santiago – pampered by our wealthy host families and their servants. For most of us this was upward mobility, a free upgrade over what we left behind in the States. We liked it, but not without some pangs of guilt.

After training we dispersed to our assigned cities in Chile. Mine was the town of Ancud, the small administrative outpost of the island of Chiloe which was well known for its inhospitable, cold and rainy climate. But I was happy. At last I would be among the poor and on a mission. My partner Volunteer, also assigned to Ancud, was older and less enthusiastic. I soon found out why.

On the Brink (One Year Later on assignment in Chiloe)

John quickly disembarked as the bus ended its arduous journey to Ancud. A man on a mission, there was no time to take in his new surroundings. He couldn't wait to start work, replacing the Volunteer who partnered with me during my first year on the Island. John hurried across the Town Plaza, suitcase in hand, and bounded up the stairs to our office. The room was once grand with freshly painted high ceilings, polished floors, and furniture befitting the Office of the Bishop of Chiloe. Now it was bare with just two chairs, one small table, a light bulb hanging from the water-stained ceiling which crowned cracked walls, and broken windows. The 1960 Earthquake destroyed most of the Cathedral and its adjoining rectory that now served as our office.

I was there waiting for him, totally unprepared for the concise briefing that he expected. I had not seen him for almost a year, and just wanted to catch up on the news. John began to ask hard questions about my progress on the project. I could only mutter weak almost incoherent responses. My breath condensed as it hit the cold air of the office. It was easier for John to see my words than hear them. The inquisition proceeded. The few facts that I did manage to communicate only reflected the pitiful state of our project. Realizing this, I began to smile. This soon escalated to uncontrollable laughter. I couldn't stop. John was perplexed and disappointed. This was to be his beginning – a new life and job in Ancud. Was it going to be his end as well? It certainly seemed to him that I was near my end. Was he foolhardy to have sought a transfer from his comfortable job in Chile's Capital City to this Siberia-like Government outpost manned by those exiled from Santiago?

My thoughts were less speculative than his, grounded by my experience in Ancud. Yes, I was bemused by his idealism and businesslike approach to his first day on the Island. But my laughter was too loud and hysterical for just that. My pent-up frustration caused by perseverance in my work with little to show for it was a more likely explanation. My idealism was waning. The Chilean organization for whom we worked and the poor who were to benefit weren't all that interested in our efforts. It seemed that it was me, not them, who needed help! My once lofty ambitions needed downsizing to simpler things, like learning a new language, getting a date, or winning bar room dice games.

John and I did not discuss this incident further. We quickly terminated our ill-advised meeting in the Rectory, and walked across the street to the warm and welcoming Hotel Plaza Bar. The pounding of leather cups and the spilling of dice on wooden tables were reassuring. Here I could show a tangible accomplishment of my service in Ancud. I had mastered the intricacies of Chile's most popular dice game, called "Lo Dudo," meaning "I doubt it." My Chilean friends and colleagues now lost more often than they won, and paid for the wine and food expenses of most matches. This also fed my soul which was battered by reality. Was there a better remedy? The game says it all. - Lo dudo – I doubt it.

Mission Revised

My second year on the island was more productive. Work expectations were now realistic. We no longer tried to energize TECHO into action, but rather concentrated our efforts on a few local groups who seemed interested in our services. We helped an artisan fishing cooperative to access funding and technical assistance from the Chilean Government, and organized a women's group to start up a small business making school uniforms. These achievements were modest, certainly below our aspirations. But that no longer bothered me, the hysterical laughter was gone. Things were looking up. My Spanish was quite passable. I played basketball in a local league, and took flying lessons for five months, culminating in a Chilean pilot's license granted a few days before my marriage and departure from Chile.

Marriage? What! Why, where, when and with whom? This was the panicked reaction of my parents, perhaps similar to their surprise when I decided to drop out of ND, enter the seminary and then leave it. Learning of my marriage intentions for the first time, my parents immediately offered their previously withheld moral support for my plan to return home from Chile on a motorcycle. To them, a motorcycle trip seemed safer than marrying some swarthy foreigner. Their perception of the Spanish speaking world was some combination of Broadway's West Side Story, bloody dictators and communist revolutionaries. Undeterred, I spurned the motorcycle and married Ivonne just before completing Peace Corps service and returning home. Fortunately, what happened after that has all been good.