

# Robert M. Wulff

August 28, 1926 - October 9, 1999

Bob was born in Albert Lea, Minnesota, the second son of Jacob and Kathleen Wulff. A bright, popular student, Bob lettered in football and basketball, and was elected class president. In 1942, when Bob was sixteen, his brother Warren (Jim) joined the Marines, and was sent to the Pacific to fight the Japanese. As a teenager in World War II, Bob always assumed that he would go to fight as well, but was discharged from the Navy after only 9 days because his vision was deemed too poor for military service. He tried to get into the Army and the Marines, but neither would take him. Bob was quite disappointed, but decided to get on with his life by enrolling at the University of Minnesota.

Naturally, the Army decided at this time that Bob would make a great soldier, and drafted him. He spent several months at Fort Snelling, first in training, and then doing odd jobs around the Fort. He had a feeling that there was something else that he should be doing, and decided to make a deal with God. If He would send Bob to China, then Bob would do whatever work God meant for him to do.

This was a rather tall order, given that at the time, there were no U.S. troops in China, but a few days later it was announced that 120 soldiers were being sent to China, and Bob was one of them. Later in life, Bob was rather fond of warning people to be careful what they ask for, because they just might get it.

*Although I was excited, I was also worried. I had made this bargain, and whether or not it could be proved that my assignment was an answer to my prayers, it seemed to me that I was now bound to take up some kind of missionary work when this was over. I did not like the idea at all. I had never wanted to be an ordained missionary, or even a doctor, but now it seemed that I would have to do one of these two things. I decided to put off even thinking about it until I had to make a decision, by which time I might have found a way around the dilemma.*

*As things turned out, going to China solved the problem for me. I had not been in the country long before I realized that I could not turn my back on all the misery and poverty of the Chinese people.*

Bob was not your average soldier. While the rest of the troops were carousing and fighting, Bob was learning to speak Chinese and befriended the unit's interpreter, Wong Teh Kung. He started teaching english classes on a regular schedule, which allowed him to better communicate with his new friends.

During this time, Bob was introduced to Wong Chen Tang (Dr. Wong), and they developed a very close friendship. Eventually, Bob's term of service came to an end, and he tried to extend his tour.

*But the Army was not interested in providing draftees with overseas sightseeing tours, and I was informed that an extension of my tour was out of the question unless I signed on as a regular for a three-year engagement. Suspecting that if I signed, military bureaucracy would promptly assign me to Alaska or some other area far away from China, I declined the invitation and became a civilian again.*

After returning to Albert Lea, Bob decided that he should prepare himself to return to China by completing his college degree, and enrolled at St. Olaf college. He was able to room with his old friend and fellow veteran, Ken Hodges, as well as Armin Weng and Floyd "Nudge" Nordland.

At the time, St.Olaf students were not allowed to have cars, so hitchhiking was common. One day, Bob and Nudge were hitchhiking to Albert Lea, and were picked up by an elderly gentleman who was driving a car that he had just purchased. He also stopped to pick up some students from Luther who were hitchhiking to Iowa. On the



way to Albert Lea, the car got a flat, and Bob took a look and discovered that the man had been cheated. All of the tires on the car were in terrible shape. The Luther students said that they had important work to do in the name of the Lord, and couldn't be delayed, so they hitched another ride. Bob and Nudge stayed with the old man and helped him to get new tires for his car. They then drove with him down into Iowa to make sure he would be able to complete his journey safely.

This incident taught Bob an important lesson in not being so full of your mission to the Lord to walk away from God's work when it is staring you in the face.

In the summer time, Bob ran a business where he showed movies outdoors in small towns and sold popcorn. Over his four years in college, he was able to save up several thousand dollars to finance his trip and also purchase a movie camera that he would use later to film several documentary films about his work.

On April 23, 1952, Bob left San Francisco harbor on board the M.S. Francisville, bound for Manila. It was a pleasant voyage, and Bob was eager to see Dr. Wong again. The morning after arriving in Manila, he headed straight for the Chinese consulate to obtain a visa to enter Formosa, where Dr. Wong was living. Unfortunately, there was a restriction in Bob's passport, forbidding entry to Formosa, and he was instructed to go to the U.S. Consulate to have the restriction removed. The official at the Chinese Consulate assured him it would be a simple matter.

The officials at the U.S. Consulate were completely unsympathetic, and would only forward the request to Washington, where a reply could be expected in approximately three months. Disheartened, Bob returned to the Chinese Consul, who suggested he fly to Hong Kong, and try again with a different set of bureaucrats. Bob arrived in Hong Kong, at the start of a long holiday weekend, and spent the time sightseeing and buying presents to send home while he awaited the opening of the consulate on Tuesday. The officials in Hong Kong were no more helpful than those in Manila, so Bob sent a telegram to Dr. Wong, and asked if perhaps he could come to Hong Kong instead. Unfortunately, Dr. Wong could not get an exit permit, either. Defeated, Bob wired home for some more money to return home, and set out via Bangkok, Rangoon, and Calcutta.

After a few days in Bangkok, Bob tired of city life, and headed north on the train to Chiang Mai. At the time, Chiang Mai was still a relatively small town, with few foreigners. When he checked in with the consulate there, he was introduced to an American Colonel, who offered him a tour of the area. After several days, the Colonel took Bob to visit McKean Leper Colony, on the outskirts of Chiang Mai.

*I was not too anxious to go along, as the idea of leprosy had always frightened me. But I had no reason for turning down the invitation, so I went along. At the time there were about 500 patients in the colony and another 2000 scattered among leprosy villages in the area...I was pleasantly surprised by the layout of the colony. Apart from the usual hospital wards and dormitories, many cabins had been built so that families could stay together. The colony was far from self-supporting, but the patients worked in gardens, grew a certain amount of food, and kept chickens and ducks.*

*No amenities, however, could hide the horror of leprosy...to my mind, it is one of the most horrible afflictions a person can have. During my visit I was men and women with nothing left of their hands and feet except rough, uneven stumps. The faces of many patients were badly deformed where the bridges of their noses had collapsed, and the ears of some were pedulous and puffy. In addition to the physical deformity the patients suffered mentally. They had been shunned by their society and cast out. They knew that they were ugly and unwanted, and I thought I could detect in their eyes a loss of hope.*

*That night I lay in bed and wondered whether the visit to McKean Colony had any significance for me. Here I was at the end of the line in Thailand, a country I had not even originally intended visiting. I had been prevented from joining my friend Dr. Wong, and had drifted into Thailand with no plans. Was it possible, I asked myself, that God had led me deliberately into Chiang Mai? I did not know, but I realized that I could not leave Chiang Mai without taking at least one more step along this new path.*

*I decided to visit the McKean Colony again the next day and see what if anything, happened.*

When Bob returned, Dr. Buker took him around the colony again, and gave an explanation of the theories of how leprosy is spread, and the various treatments. He offered Bob a room at the colony, if he would like to spend

some time there, helping out for a couple of months, and though Bob was not excited about the prospect, he realized that a door had been opened to him, and that he could not refuse.

Bob settled into the colony, and began to study about leprosy. At the time, people were coming from all over the world to learn from Dr. Buker, as he was considered something of a world authority in the field. There were surgeries to observe, and soon Bob was giving injections into nerves and trimming dead and ulcerated tissue from patients feet. It was rather gruesome work, but Bob persevered, and became comfortable in his new knowledge. They frequently visited other areas, treating patients in small villages in the mountains, sometimes encountering opium runners, and officials who had not received their payoff, and were therefore hunting the opium runners. After about a month, most of the other students left for new placements, but Bob elected to stay on and serve as Dr. Buker's assistant, if he could prove himself helpful. He shifted his course of study to learning Thai, so that he could better communicate with the patients.



*I am afraid that after 2 weeks of language study, I am not encouraged. I have, I suppose, made some progress but when I compare what I know with what I still have to learn, I am tempted to call the whole idea off. Not only do I have to learn to speak and understand what I hear, but I have to learn a new kind of alphabet and to read and write at the same time. Fortunately, my duties are kept light. I am in charge of the wood carving, and am trying to establish a profitable business for the colony. The idea is to give the carvers an incentive to work faster by paying them by piece work. Previously, they received nothing for their work except the rice, housing and medicine that was provided to all patients whether they worked or not.*

About this time, Bob struck up a friendship with Surin, Dr. Buker's chief assistant. Along with his study of Thai, Bob started teaching classes to the Thai assistants in the colony who wished to learn English. Surin soon stood out, as his command of English was better than the others, and he also happened to be about the same age as Bob. Surin had arrived in the colony a few years earlier, with an arrested case of leprosy. Dr. Buker soon realized the young man's potential, and urged him to stay on as an assistant, and giving him medical training. Surin originally arrived with a very anti-American attitude, but by the time he met Bob, he had mellowed some, and accepted the Christian faith as well.

Things were going well around the colony, and Bob had the opportunity to ride elephants as they were working, and travel around the countryside a bit in conjunction with his work. Some of the travel was rather difficult, due to the rainy season, as many of the dirt roads were flooded or washed out. There was the additional threat of teak thieves and opium dealers, both of which seemed to be on the rise. One village nearby had 12 murders in 2 months, and headless corpses were discovered floating down the river. Inside the colony, there was a feeling of safety, however.

*I helped Mrs. Buker distribute donated clothing to the leprosy women. In an effort to insure fair distribution, each woman took a number and was given the article of clothing corresponding to the number. The women looked pathetic with their club feet, deformed hands, and badly disfigured faces. And yet they reminded me of almost any group of ladies at a rummage sale. They gossiped and shouted and pushed one another to get to the front. Our method of distribution produced some interesting results.*

*It seemed that the oldest and most disfigured women drew numbers providing them with chic new strapless bathing suits or summer frocks while the young belles of the colony received matronly dresses or thick underwear. What a variety of exchanges and transactions ensued! Although most of the stuff was junk I think everyone was satisfied when the distribution was finally over. Of course, a person who has nothing to start with is not too difficult to satisfy.*

In October, 1952, after 3 months at McKean, Bob's visa was due to expire, so he travelled to Bangkok to get it renewed. On the return trip, he visited Phra Pa Deng Leprosy Colony, the largest government-run colony in the

country, located near Bangkok, but still geographically isolated.

*To get there we had to take a bus, then a small river launch, then walk a mile, and then take another boat. The colony depressed me with its dirt, drabness, and lack of spirit. The grass was uncut, and the walks in bad repair. The people seemed to be completely without hope or spirit, their eyes were dull, and they wandered aimlessly about. Although the colony is not escape-proof, there are fences and guards keeping a strict watch over the inmates. From the reports I have heard, the food and treatment are inadequate. Such depressing restrictive surroundings seem to destroy most of what is human in a person. It is not surprising that our Chiangmai colony is full of runaways from Phra Pa Daeng Colony.*

*Although I am not an expert on leprosy colonies I do believe that this type of colony is typical of the places that for years have been the only havens for leprosy patients. I know that there are financial and other problems involved in providing places for lepers, but I cannot accept the idea that the Phra Pa Daeng type of colony is the right answer. Neither is the McKean Colony, better though it is than Phra Pa Daeng. There must be a way of helping these people to live more normal and less institutional lives.*

All quotes (in italics) are from *Village of the Outcasts*.