

Obituary

Murray behaved a little differently from the run of Anglo empire correspondents when I first ran into him in Saigon, probably at the five o'clock follies, the daily U.S military briefings, all those years ago.

Unlike most of them, he didn't have the air of either the Oxbridge types or the breed who'd gone to work as office boys at 16 and figured by the time they were covering Vietnam they were pretty tough "blokes" and knew it all. Murray defied all stereotypes. I remember one of my first conversations with him over dinner on the top floor of the Majestic Hotel, overlooking the Saigon River, where I was staying. He didn't mind saying what he thought, and he listened to my views too, all quite different from most of the Brits and Aussies I ran into during those years in and out of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos.

From there, we went on numerous stories out of Saigon, up Route One toward Tay Ninh, down in the Mekong Delta, sometimes to places that weren't all that "secure." Before going down a canal in a fishing boat with Don Tate, correspondent for the Scripps-Howard papers, Murray wanted to know what we were getting into. As we cruised by pastoral scenes, waving at kids on the banks, he cautioned of the need for "reconnaissance."

We got to calling Murray "bao chi" – Vietnamese for reporter. He talked about some of his exploits but didn't brag. I didn't know, until I read the obituaries, that Murray had been "Chief Correspondent" for the *Sunday Times* and had quite a reputation on Fleet Street. Murray would chat it up with anyone. After listening intently to one old man we were interviewing he told me bluntly "droopy drawers" was living in the past.



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At some point, he'd say he had to get back to Saigon by Friday and write 2,000 words for the paper.

I never actually saw what he filed, but he made his routine sound almost rhythmic, embellishing stories with on-scene colour and impressions from everywhere. Many years later, I did see a 12,000-word review that he wrote for the *London Review of Books* in 2002 in which I was a little startled to find, lower down, "Don Kirk of the Chicago Tribune and I were shelled in the cemetery of a village that had declared for the VC, by South Vietnamese who knew perfectly well who we were" but were blaming "the Western press" for the sellout of the 1973 Paris Peace. Uh, I'm not sure the village, in the upper delta, was "VC," and I don't recall shells landing where we were though they may have been fired overhead to scare us away. Whatever, the story was accurate about attitudes. Murray conveyed basic truths – no need to let petty details get in the way.

After Vietnam, the next time I saw Murray he had the august title of Asia Editor of *Newsweek*. He also had a new young wife, Jenny, whom he had met when she took dictation from him on short-wave calls as he was traversing the Atlantic in a sail boat for the *Sunday Times*. They were living in a crowded ground-level flat in Kowloon, not the luxury digs one might have expected to go along with the new title, and they had an infant son. Murray was not happy about the job, complaining about "21-year-olds from Brooklyn" rewriting his florid prose. By the time he quit, he hated the magazine totally. Later, the late Maynard Parker, Hong Kong and Saigon bureau chief, who had either hired or recommended him, told me Murray "wasn't made for *Newsweek*."

He, Jenny and their child, the first of three, soon shifted to Japan, his home for the next 30 years. When I saw him again, they and one or two more kids were living in a farmhouse in a village named Aikawa-cho, in the countryside south of the Tokyo sprawl. He'd gotten the house for almost nothing. The family, plus any odd guest and a dog named Chomo, slept on futons. Jenny did the cooking and most of the cleaning and taught English nearby and in Tokyo, a terribly crowded two-hour commute away. The kids all went to a local Japanese school.

A night or a weekend out there was an experience, Murray spinning stories, showing stuff he'd written, in draft or in print, attacking editors who he said had reached their lofty positions by "kissing bum and punching clocks." Every week or two he'd go into Tokyo, sometimes with Jenny, holding court at the Foreign Correspondents' Club, entertaining the bar. Eventually he was doing television specials. I recall a scene where he was yakking from the depths of a steaming Japanese bath.

After some years, Murray began writing for *The New Yorker* and *The Atlantic*. A couple of memorable pieces had to do with Hiroshima and the downing in 1983 of KAL 007 by a Soviet fighter plane. His Hiroshima piece for *The New Yorker* was probably his greatest single achievement – almost an entire issue devoted to why the Japanese would have surrendered without the A-bombing.

Murray, Jenny and children suffered one terrible experience in Aikawa-cho that could have been tragic but wasn't. While Murray was travelling, their farmhouse, built of thin wood with sliding doors and a thatched roof, burnt to the ground. Murray credited Jenny with rescuing the kids.

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He spoke to me later of the bravery of women in defence of their family. Murray owed not only that but much else to Jenny, who maintained life on an even keel, teaching English when times were tough for Murray. She got the kids to school and held the home together. It was due to her relations and popularity in the neighbourhood that local people got the family a new house, somewhat smaller but safer, in the same village.

Around this time, maybe influenced by the fire, Murray began to see Japan failing as a society and a country -- a view that pervaded a lengthy article he wrote for *The Atlantic*. Those who knew him in Japan got much longer versions in numerous conversations. I remember him saying, the last time I made the pilgrimage to Aikawa-cho, a dozen years ago, that Japan was "through," "finished." It was, as they say, a good story and might even be true.

I missed seeing Murray as he gradually faded away with Parkinson's and he, Jenny and the family went to Australia, the land of Murray's upbringing, for

medical treatment. We remained in touch through cards and emails. Jenny spread the word of the republication a couple of years ago of Murray's Fleet Street novel *Crooked Sixpence*, the first edition of which was pulped in a crazy libel suit that I heard him talking about but never fully understood. A photograph shows him getting an honorary doctorate from Sydney University, where he studied before migrating to Fleet Street. Others show him seated in front of his family, Jenny a pillar of support to the last.

The last one, for 2010, shows Murray at the Amity Aged Care Home. He looks quite gaunt, his face vacant but cast in a mode of determination, as if forever focused on a story, Jenny beside him, Matt, Alex and Lindi standing behind. "I'm afraid Murray is increasingly frail," says the note from Jenny, "but at least he is not aware how long he has been in the home." I wonder how much, or even if, he knew of the long belated success of "*Crooked Sixpence*".

Those who worked with Murray may remember his interviewing style -- he did most of the talking, telling garrulous stories, interspersed with caustic remarks, occasionally letting the interviewee interrupt with a comment. That was Murray. Others will have their own special memories of this unique, unforgettable, fun-loving and thoroughly kind and decent individual. Over the years he was an enduring friend everywhere -- in Vietnam, Hong Kong and Japan -- and the friend of numerous others whom he had down to his farmhouse for great conversations and story-telling -- Murray telling the stories, others listening, sometimes applauding, exit laughing.

Don Kirk