

twice saved twice saved

war survivor,
ex-inmate
relishes new life

By John W. Kennedy

Gregory “Chino” Thrasher has survived the bombing of his village in the Vietnam War as an infant, being hidden by an immigrant Chinese family as a baby, gang life on Dallas streets as a teenager and more than a decade of early adulthood incarcerated in Texas.

In September, Thrasher graduated with an associate degree in biblical studies from Calvary Commission in Lindale, Texas. Thrasher now serves as an intern in the Assemblies of God ministry where former inmates learn Christian principles while transitioning back into society.

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A Huey helicopter pilot swore he heard a baby screaming above the roar of the engine. He landed the chopper and found a crying infant among craters created by mortar shells from gunship and artillery fire.

Thrasher's miraculous story begins in 1970 in the highlands of North Vietnam on a day the U.S. military bombed a sparsely populated village — a suspected storage site for weapons for the Viet Cong. In a follow-up surveillance of the area, a Huey helicopter pilot swore he heard a baby screaming above the roar of the engine. He landed the chopper and found a crying infant among craters created by mortar shells from gunship and artillery fire. Civilian casualties included Gregory's mother.

Soldiers brought Gregory to a U.S. military field hospital, where soldier Larry Thrasher had been a patient with a back injury caused by jumping out of a helicopter. After consulting with his wife back in the States, Thrasher determined to adopt Gregory. But Thrasher encountered three years of bureaucratic red tape.

During that span, Trinh and Minh Khai, Chinese immigrants living in Vietnam's Central Highlands, became Gregory's foster parents. Because of fighting and instability in the country, they repeatedly had to move and hide the boy. Eventually, Thrasher formally adopted Gregory.

Gregory remembers going to church and vacation Bible school while growing up in a white middle-class suburb of Dallas. But he didn't personally connect with Christians or make Jesus his Savior.

Instead, Gregory got involved with the wrong people. He became addicted to illegal

drugs. He joined a street gang. He embarked on a life of crime. He left home at 16.

"Through his elementary years he was exposed mostly to Caucasian children," says his adoptive mother, Patricia Stone, 63. "He wasn't treated any differently by us or anyone he was around, but maybe he felt like he didn't fit in, being from a different race."

Rebelliousness led to repeated trips to jails and prisons.

"I was pretty much alienated from God," Thrasher recalls. "I really didn't know God had a purpose for my life."

But Thrasher came to know God in an ironic way in a correctional facility in Edinburg, Texas. In 2003, Thrasher began serving his third stint behind bars, this time for aggravated assault with a deadly weapon connected with shooting a rival gang member in a drug deal.

Thrasher belonged to a gang in prison, and the only place members could congregate was surreptitiously during church services. They gathered in the back of the chapel to talk to each other.

A Pentecostal prison volunteer chaplain figured out the real reason Thrasher and his associates showed up.

One day in 2005, the chaplain spoke to those huddled in the back of the room. She commended them for their faithfulness in attendance, but warned them that if they didn't accept Christ as Savior and if they didn't change



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The Khai family kept Greg Thrasher (front, center) safe in Vietnam for three years.

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(Top to bottom) Greg, his parents and brothers in 1985; Thrasher still keeps in touch with members of the Khai family, including youngest daughter Diane (pictured); Thrasher is an intern at Calvary Commission, helping male students transition back into society.

their lifestyle, they would go to a bigger prison when they died and never get out. There would be no time off for good behavior, no way to hire a skilled lawyer for a reduced sentence, no way to bribe a judge to escape judgment.

“God made sure I heard His Word about eternity,” Thrasher says. “That message from the prison lady woke me up. So it turned out that I met God in a prison gang meeting.”

Thrasher started reading a Bible, but the first verse he read — Matthew 5:39 about turning the other cheek — made him throw the book down in anger. How could he, by now a veteran gangbanger, be expected to forgive others of perceived wrongdoing?

Nevertheless, Thrasher knew what he had to do. He went to his fellow gang members, told them he had become a Christian and bravely declared he needed to leave. He got out — after three guys beat him up.

Thrasher thought life would be easier, but he had to endure two years of further hardships and humiliation. No longer protected by his own gang, Thrasher became the target of insults and threats from rival gangs.

Still, Thrasher recognized the hand of a merciful God. He ended up serving only four years of what he says should have been a life sentence. During those final two years, Thrasher began paying attention in church services. He met AG Chaplain Joe Fauss, who founded Calvary Commission in 1977. Upon release,

Thrasher began a two-year residential Calvary Commission study program in 2007. Now he helps others gain the knowledge and skills he acquired.

Fauss says Thrasher became the main leader of male students because he has leadership qualities that earn respect.

“The fruit of the Spirit is evident when a former gangbanger in prison can now softly defuse situations,” Fauss says. “Gregory resolves conflicts diplomatically, and he has a real talent for relating to people.”

“I believe I can help ex-offenders continue their walk with Christ and discover their ministry gifts,” Thrasher says.

For years, Thrasher’s family didn’t know his whereabouts. But after he became a Christian, he began writing long letters weekly to his mother, who lives in Tuscaloosa, Ala., and is divorced from his father. They now see each other three or four times a year.

“Calvary Commission really helped turn Gregory’s life around,” says Stone, who gave birth to two boys after adopting her first son. “He’s a dedicated Christian. We should never give up on our kids.”

Thrasher hopes one day to reconnect as meaningfully with his father.

“It’s a blessing that God has brought me to true freedom from my life of sin,” Thrasher says. **e**

JOHN W. KENNEDY is news editor of the *Pentecostal Evangel*.

E-mail your comments to pe@ag.org.

ARCS

OF SALVATION

To know God and be ready for heaven, follow these steps:

A. Admit you are a sinner.

“There is no one righteous, not even one ... for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Romans 3:10,23 (See Romans 5:8; 6:23.)

Ask God’s forgiveness and repent of your sins.

“Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” Romans 10:13 (See Acts 3:19.)

B. Believe in Jesus

(put your trust in Him) as your only hope of salvation. “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” John 3:16 (See John 14:6.)

Become a child of God by receiving Christ.

“To all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.” John 1:12 (See Revelation 3:20.)

C. Confess that Jesus is your Lord.

“If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” Romans 10:9 (See verse 10.)

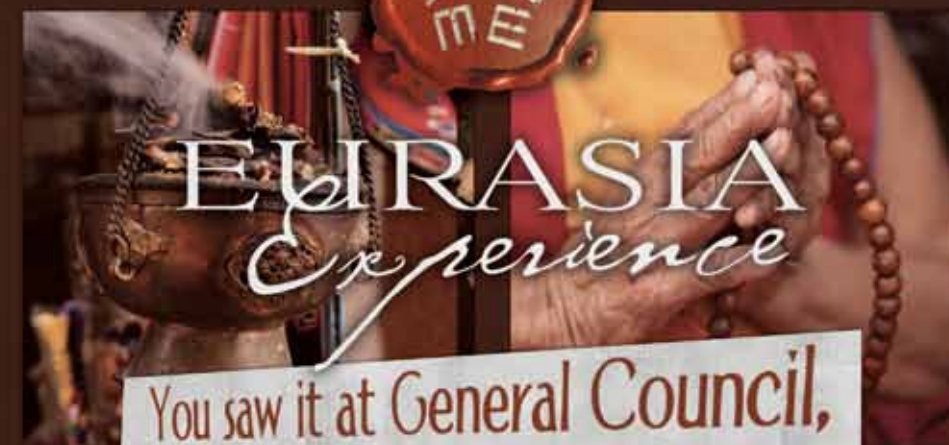
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