

Connetts risked their lives for Bangladesh in '71

While Ellen was imprisoned in Bangladesh for her humanitarian work with Operation Omega, she discovered she was pregnant. The news came as a shock under such dire circumstances. Alone in her cell, thoughts of the child she was now carrying gave her strength to endure. For Paul and Ellen, the pregnancy and birth under such traumatic conditions were almost too much to bear. But amidst the grief and trauma, there was also joy – they were now parents with a new life that symbolised hope after months of darkness.

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Ellen was determined to help Bengalis directly through emergency relief efforts this time. As Paul coordinated the broader awareness-raising and advocacy work of Action Bangladesh, Ellen and Roger Moody had set up Operation Omega to send aid workers and supplies into Bangladesh. The two groups worked in parallel - Action Bangladesh pressuring world leaders to intervene, while Operation Omega attempted to provide desperately needed food, medical aid and support inside Bangladesh itself. It was a coordinated two-pronged effort, with Paul and Ellen tackling different but complementary missions. They drew on the same extraordinary coalition, leveraging everyone's skills and resources to raise awareness and send tangible assistance internally. Together, Action Bangladesh and Operation Omega formed a comprehensive campaign driven by a deep commitment to supporting the Bengali people in their time of crisis. Ellen said, 'Operation Omega was founded on the principle that we cannot let "political borders" stand in the way of aiding those in dire need. When the Bengali people were suffering atrocities and starvation, we refused to stand by because of political boundaries. If people needed help, we would find a way to provide it directly.' 'That's how our white WWII ambulance painted with the Omega symbol came to be. We would load up supplies and volunteers in this ambulance and attempted to drive across national borders to bring aid directly to the Bengali people. It was risky and illegal, but while we would not be deterred, we were stopped by the Pakistan army. While Paul coordinated protests and pressure to recognise Bangladesh politically, I focused on attempting to get immediate medical care, food and support to people internally,' added Ellen.

Operation Omega sent two volunteers to transport aid to Bangladesh – Freer Spreckley, blessed with the ability to get anything done, and a former policeman - on an arduous ambulance trip. They loaded a massive World War Two ambulance with medical supplies and set off from London to the Persian Gulf, where it was transported by ship to Mumbai. Then, it was driven from Mumbai to Calcutta. The treacherous journey took them across mountain ranges where they sometimes encountered bears. But they persevered, determined to bring desperately needed aid to

Bangladesh. When they arrived in Calcutta, the local Gandhi Foundation supporters secured a small flat for Operation Omega's team to stay. Twelve volunteers crammed into this modest one-room apartment, preparing for risky border crossings into Bangladesh. To begin with the ambulance was driven openly up to the Pakistan border. But with the TV camera rolling, the Pakistani authorities refused it entry, and guards literally pushed it back into India. On the second try the Omega workers were detained but later released. No medical supplies had been delivered but a strong political message had been registered.

Paul arrived in Calcutta in September and they had spent a little time together there before he was approached by a Bengali doctor from Bangladesh requesting help to get medicines into Bangladesh. Paul along with Freer, a member of Operation Omega, were able to get a supply of medicines from one of the relief agencies helping the Bengali refugees in Calcutta. Paul and Freer accompanied 150 Mukti Bahini (Bengali freedom fighters) into Bangladesh. In their journey they were able to take photographs of the refugees exiting Bangladesh, "I saw eight-year-olds carrying four-year-olds," said Paul. "I saw a little girl, tears streaming down her face. She wanted to cry and stop, but she had to keep walking. We walked for two days and two nights and then we got on a boat and went for two more days and nights, and we reached a village, which in the monsoon rain had become an island. While there we witnessed smoke rising from a nearby village after being bombed by Pakistani planes. The next day we filmed the remains of the village on a camera loaned to us by UPTN. Later this footage was shown around the world. I captured these images." While Paul was away on this secret fact-finding mission miles within the embattled area, Ellen decided to make her sari-run across the border. Paul had made Ellen promise not to go into Bangladesh while he was gone. But Ellen thought it was safe. She felt the work needed to be done, and the others were busy with their own tasks. With another Omega worker, a 20-year-old South African student named Gordon Slavin, Ellen set off for a Catholic mission in Jessore 15 miles inside the Pakistani border. She described, 'It was the monsoon season, so we went by boat over flooded rivers. Travelling at night, it took us nine hours to reach the mission. The priests took us in, and everything seemed safe.'

But by the following day, 30 armed West Pakistani soldiers greeted them as they stepped onto the mission door. She said, 'An informer must have seen us. We were arrested, tried and sentenced. Gordon and I just resigned to spending the next two years in a jail in Jessore. Their crime was illegally crossing a border to bring 200 saris to stranded Bengali villagers. When Ellen was asked in a televised interview, 'Didn't you know what you did was illegal?'. Ellen said, 'Of course I did. But I don't think you need permission to help someone who's suffering?'

Paul heard over the Pakistan radio that two Operation Omega workers were arrested, and one of them was a woman. He immediately knew who she was. With that, he returned to Calcutta, then England and then to the United States to work on her release. "I was worried and angry at the same time," Among other things, it meant that he would not be able to speak out on what



I had seen in Bangladesh as he had hoped. Until Ellen was released, I could not speak out or campaign without fear of reprisal on her. Fortunately, we only had to wait two months – but it was a very worrying two months." On 4 December, Ellen Connett and Gordon Slavin were released and escorted back into Calcutta by an Indian Major. On being released from the Pakistani prison, she recalled, 'I can just remember the shouts of happiness the day the guerrillas took Jessore and liberated our prison. 'Joi Bangla!' they kept yelling. Victory to Bengal! The week before India intervened, India's fighter jets roared over the Jessore prison as a show of force. The deafening noise terrified us prisoners as we feared they were attacking. We all screamed, convinced our end was near. The Indian

military was sending a clear warning for the Pakistani forces to withdraw. But to us trapped there, it felt like being caught in the crossfire. I was certain I would die and never see my newborn again. But the next morning, I woke unusually early to sunlight and a beautiful sound - people chanting "Joi Bangla" outside the prison walls. India had launched a full intervention overnight. Pakistani guards had fled, leaving us unharmed. The chanting signalled freedom was imminent. After months of imprisonment, suddenly, we were being liberated! Stepping outside the prison at last, smoke was still rising from targeted buildings. But the chants of "Joi Bangla" echoed all around. After everything, we were alive to see this moment. I said my own prayer of thanks as we marched into that smoky dawn, the red and green of the new Bangladesh flag flying proudly ahead. What had seemed impossible was now glorious. These people have suffered enough. They deserve some joy. When they returned to New York, she told Paul she was pregnant. While Ellen was imprisoned in Bangladesh for her humanitarian work with Operation Omega, she discovered she was pregnant. The news came as a shock under such dire circumstances. Alone in her cell, thoughts of the child she was now carrying gave her strength to endure. For Paul and Ellen, the pregnancy and birth under such traumatic conditions were almost too much to bear. But amidst the grief and trauma, there was also joy - they were now parents with a new life that symbolised hope after months of darkness. As they processed the complex emotions, their commitment to one another and to justice deepened. Bringing their child into the world had changed everything. He was the legacy of their love and their still unflinching dedication to humanitarian ideals, even in the face of unthinkable cruelty. They vowed to honour his birth by continuing to stand up for human rights, no matter the cost. They called the new born Peter William Mujib, named after Sheikh Mujib.

This is how the New York Times reported on 14 December 1971: A 28-year-old American woman held in a Pakistani prison for two months until she was freed last week by Bengali rebels returned to the United States last night for a reunion with her husband and parents. Mrs. Ellen Connett, of Dumont, N.J., arrived on an Air India flight from Calcutta shortly before 11:30 P.M. at Kennedy Airport. "I've gone through very little compared to the suffering, to the immense suffering,

of the people of Bangle. Desh," Mrs. Connett said. Mrs. Connett, who worked for a relief organization known as Omega, was arrested in small village in East Pakistan early in October for illegally crossing the border with relief supplies for Bengali natives.

Finally arriving back in America, Ellen braced herself to face her parents for the first time since her hurried wedding in March 1970. Despite letters, Ellen's parents had no real understanding of the dangerous mission she had thrown herself into. All they knew was that their daughter had abruptly eloped to follow a cause across the world.

Talking to Daily Star, the couple said the world should not forget about Bangladesh and the genocide that took place in 1971, 'We should never forget Bangladesh reminding the world about the war, sacrifice of the people, and how brutal humans can be, not to mention how beautiful some of them can be.'

Commenting on Bangladesh's struggle, Paul said, looking back on Bangladesh's fight for independence, there were clear genocidal implications in what West Pakistan tried to do. They sought to eliminate Bengali culture, starting with banning the Bengali language. Depriving a people of their native language is a stepping stone to genocide - an attempt to erase their cultural identity. The world was focused on the mass killings and pragmatic challenges of governing East and West Pakistan, separated by over a thousand miles. But this cultural erasure was a grave threat as well. As Ellen learned more about Bengal's rich literary tradition, she gained a deeper understanding of how much was at stake. The Bengalis were fiercely proud of their language, art and culture. Oppressing these integral parts of their identity was another form of violence.

Finally, both felt Bangladesh has a significant role in upholding secularism, women's empowerment, and its beauty and music. Paul is a fan of Tagore music. They also praised the Bangladesh government for giving shelter to the Rohingya refugees and becoming a host country the way India hosted over 11 million Bangladeshi refugees during the war in 1971

In 2013, the Connetts were honoured for their contribution back in 1971 by the Bangladesh government as "Friends of Liberation War."

Ansar Ahmed Ullah is a contributor to *The Daily Star*.



The gathering in London's Trafalgar Square on August 1, 1971, to form public opinion against the Pakistani junta and advocate for the recognition of Bangladesh.

COURTESY: PAUL CONNETT